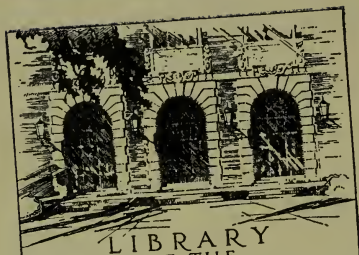
The Weaker Vessel

D. Christie Murray



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THE WEAKER VESSEL

THE WEAKER VESSEL

BY

D. CHRISTIE MURRAY

AUTHOR OF 'JOSEPH'S COAT,' 'RAINBOW GOLD,' 'AUNT RACHEL,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLS.

VOL. I.

London

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CHAPTER I

George Dolmer Delamere, Esq., being advertised to lecture in the Athenæum Hall, Bondage Road, Houndsditch, under the auspices of the Moral Tone Association, I paid my threepence, secured thereby a right of entry to the reserved seats, and went in to listen. I was at this time an idle man (not, I think, from any fault of mine), and anxious to find some business which should bring in butter for that necessary daily loaf which was already provided for me by a kindly fortune. In the hope that I might one day find a literary use for the knowledge I was picking up by bits and scraps, I had devoted myself for some months to the study of life and

manners in various corners of London, and was in the habit of making enthusiastic and copious notes. George Dolmer Delamere, Esq., was known to me as to almost everybody by name, and the doings of the Moral Tone Association had been trumpeted in the newspapers of late.

I sat down and waited in a waste little room, and had ample time to look about me. There were thirty or forty people already present, and at intervals of a minute or so a new-comer would appear, smoothing his hair furtively, and creaking to a seat on tiptoe, as though he were afraid of awaking the echoes. People coughed apologetically and shuffled their feet, and sat apart from one another. The place and everybody in it had an air of penance, and, so far as one might judge from appearances, the Gospel of the Moral Tone was not gay or popular. The audience was made up mainly of youngish men, most of whom looked thoughtful and earnest. They were ill at ease because they were not used

to society, and they were evidently anxious to observe and evidently anxious to be unobserved.

When we had sat in a shuffling and uneasy silence for a quarter of an hour, a dapper man opened a door at the back of the room and looked in. The scattered assembly applauded, and the dapper man disappeared; but a few minutes later returned at the head of a string of ladies and gentlemen who, in accompaniment to a dropping fire of hand-clapping, advanced to a low platform and took their seats upon it. The leader took his place at a red-clad table in the centre, and at his right sat a gentleman whose very aspect was a lesson in tone. He was tall and slender and stately, and he condescended from his crown to his heels in every attitude and movement. His face was refined and capable, and he smiled in a complex way, which expressed curiosity, and affable pity, and a profound allowance all at once. He had a tall, bald forehead; silky white hair,

rather unusually long; long narrow hands of extraordinary whiteness and delicacy; and a mouth which, in the intervals of his smile, looked a trifle peevish and disappointed. He was in evening dress, and would have looked remarkable and distinguished anywhere. Here he was as remarkable as a stag in a herd of cart-horses. I supposed this gentleman to be George Dolmer Delamere, Esq., and the dapper man in the chair confirmed my supposition by his introductory speech.

Mr. Delamere, he told us, was a gentleman who had always taken the deepest interest in art. He was known in the highest artistic circles, as everybody knew; and his delicate taste and profound knowledge had secured for him a position unique in the artistic world. He was warmly interested also in the condition of the people, and the Moral Tone Association had been so fortunate as to enlist his invaluable sympathy and support. The dapper man would no longer detain us from the intellectual treat in store. Mr.

Dolmer Delamere would deliver to us an address on the Line of Beauty.

Mr. Delamere arose and began to talk without preface in a gentle and persuasive voice, which carried conviction of high breeding in every tone of it. A great black board on a wheeled stand was placed upon the platform, with a clean napkin hanging over it, and a number of pieces of white chalk scattered on a rest below it. Whilst he talked he took down the napkin and polished the black board, as only an accomplished critic and a gentleman could polish a black board. By way of preliminary, he told us in his soft persuasive voice that the only fashion of manfully facing the future was to convince ourselves that the past was dead. The creeds in which the human race had been cradled were dead and done with. The religious go-carts in which humanity had toddled for centuries were broken, and there was not the faintest little hope of mending them. That hope of a hereafter, with which

benevolent cheats or misguided enthusiasts had beguiled the poor and suffering, was finally extinguished. There was but one life to live, and it must be made the best of. To make the best of it, it was necessary to redeem it from ugliness. Ugliness, whether material or moral, was a crime which created its own punishment—a crime infectious as measles. Everybody suffered from it, and almost everybody actively propagated it. He proposed to offer a slight—a very slight —reactionary dose that evening. He would do his humble best to show us what beauty was and what it was not. When everything was beautiful and everybody had caught the prevailing sentiment of things, everybody would be good and everybody would be happy, because beauty and goodness and happiness were interchangeable terms. He put all this lightly, gracefully, in well-chosen, striking, and clear words, so that nobody could fail to understand him; and then, with a rare purity of line and certainty of hand,

he began to draw upon the black board. He showed us architectural lines which were ugly and architectural lines which were beautiful; and he drew for us curves of all kinds, talking without pause the while, and interesting everybody present. Then in a while he mounted to the human face, and drew a plain but not unprepossessing countenance in three-quarters. He pointed out to us how plain it was, and by the side of it drew another face, unmistakably the same, and yet pleasanter to look upon. Talking on and working with great delicacy and assurance of touch, he drew a third face, still unmistakably the same, but charming; and finally, after a fourth step towards perfection, he sketched for us a face which was simply and purely beautiful. As he stood aside from each drawing in turn as it was completed, the little audience broke into warm applause; and when the last face was finished, the stamping of enthusiastic feet raised a dust of faded odour from the floor, and made the

place feel as if it had awakened after being neglected for a century. Then, when the applause had subsided, he told us how the faults in the first face, which made it plain, were due to certain inadequacies of character, and traced for us mental and moral progress in the lines which led up to beauty.

Finally, everybody was interested, and most were charmed and persuaded. If Mr. Dolmer Delamere condescended to us—and he did—it seemed so natural, and the condescension was so delicately and kindly expressed, that not a soul could dream of taking umbrage at it. How could he but condescend, moving on so high a plane of thought, being so refined, and sensitive, and good, and so filled with that piety of cultured nature of which he spoke so often? His audience was rough and poor, and he was a product of ages of exquisitely refined thinking and living.

The dapper man proposed a vote of thanks, which was most eagerly carried, and

he promised Mr. Delamere, that if he should again honour them by his presence, an audience more fitting in number and enthusiasm would certainly welcome his appearance. Mr. Delamere responded, the ladies and gentlemen withdrew, and the audience crowded round the platform to discuss and admire the five faces on the black board, until somebody turned out the lights and we were left to find our way out in the dark.

The gas went out so suddenly, and I had been looking so intently at the five beautifully-drawn outlines, that for an instant everything was left distinctly on the retina or on the mind. On the mind, I think, for I am conscious now, and seem to have been conscious then, of the pale ring of faces, and the tint of the walls, and the shape of the windows, and the colours of the shadows that lurked in corners, and half a dozen other little details of which the eye could not at any given moment have taken complete cognisance. The faces quite lived with me,

and I went out into the streets in company with them.

I do not know if it may not seem a bold thing to say—perhaps it may seem a boastfully foolish thing, though it is no more than simple fact—but I never, in the whole course of a wandering and eventful life, have cast a conscious look upon a face, if it were only in passing along Regent Street or in struggling to a carriage from a railway platform, but I could recall it clearly and identify it, and if I were artist enough could paint it. A picture impresses itself less vividly and profoundly, and I have but dim remembrances of many portraits which I have scrutinised with care. The five sketches were but newly imprinted on the mind, however, and I carried them away with unblurred eyes. I compared the fourth and fifth, and somehow, though it was likely enough that a finer moral and intellectual excellence was expressed in the last, somehow, in my unregenerate way, I liked the fourth the better,

and thought it a more human and lovable type.

I sauntered on, without taking much notice of the people whom I passed or who breasted the bitter wind which blew behind me, until a something out of consonance with the street recalled me to myself. A pair of well-appointed carriages had halted at the edge of the horse-road, and Mr. Delamere, whose figure was easily recognisable, was shaking hands with a lady who leaned from one of them.

'Pray, let me drive you there,' said the lady; 'it is so little out of our way.'

'No,' said Mr. Delamere. 'I am obliged to you; but I will walk until I find a hansom.'

I sauntered on, thinking. I heard the lady say, 'Good-night, then,' and Mr. Delamere said to the coachman, 'Home.' The carriages moved past me, and a minute or two later Mr. Delamere went by, weaving a scarf about his throat as he walked. He

turned in passing and regarded me, and then went on with a slight shiver at the bitter wind, and, going at a swift and resolute pace, turned a corner and went out of sight. My way led me after him, and I followed. When I reached the corner he had already cleared the short street upon which I entered. Not a figure broke the monotony of its lines from end to end, and the neighbourhood was more desolate than a desert. The noise of the wind was dulled here, and I could still hear the quick and nervous beat of the lecturer's heels as he trod the pavement beyond the next turning. Suddenly the step paused, and there was a cry. I ran forward—I had not more than twenty yards to run before I reached the corner — and there was the apostle of sweetness in the hands of three who were not as yet his disciples. He was struggling with them ; his light overcoat was torn open, and I saw the gleam of his white shirt-front in the light of a street lamp. As I came in sight of the swaying quartette I

saw a blow struck. Mr. Dolmer Delamere fell full length on the pavement, and at the sound of my approaching footsteps the three scoundrels made off at a run. I shouted 'Stop thief' as I ran, and saw the fellows scatter and take different ways.

Mr. Delamere was but little hurt. His hat was crushed, his right elbow was numbed —I had a fear at first that his arm was broken —and his coat was torn in two or three places. His watch dangled from its chain, and the buttons were torn from his waistcoat, but he had lost nothing; and when I had helped him to his feet we ran at his urging to the end of the street, shouting 'Stop thief' until it became evident that his assailants had escaped. No policeman made an appearance, and, so far as I saw, no one appeared at door or window to manifest any interest in the affair. We settled down almost directly, and I ventured to observe—being young and nervous, and feeling it necessary to say something — that all the

world was not quite converted to the principles of the Moral Tone Association.

'No,' he said; 'you arrived by a happy accident for me. Those fellows were ready for any extremity of violence.' He looked down at me from his superior height, and by and by added, 'I have seen you before this evening?'

'Yes,' I answered. 'I was present at your lecture.'

'You reside in this neighbourhood?' he asked me, with that courteous condescension which had marked him all the evening.

'Some miles away,' I said. I went on to express some surprise and admiration for his coolness. Most men would have become a little flustered and excited.

'I have lived long enough to learn one important lesson,' he responded. 'Now is a man's only time. When a thing is done, I have done with it.'

I was much the more flustered of the two —indeed, he did not seem disturbed at all.

He chafed the numbed elbow, and, catching me in the act of looking at him, he said with a smile—

'That is a part of now, and will be for a day or two, I fancy. You go about among these people? Yes? You are not a clergyman? I thought not. A doctor? No? A student of human nature?'

I blushed and pleaded guilty stammeringly. They were interesting—the people down here. I am afraid I caught something of his own tone, and, being very young and an absurd prig and coxcomb in a hundred ways (though, as I believe, a fairly honest and lovable lad at bottom), I was pleased to find that he did not confound me with the rest of his hearers, and wanted him to understand that I was an intellectual young person.

'Yes,' said he, still chafing the numbed elbow; 'they make themselves interesting.' Then a moment later, 'What sort of a sample had I there to-night? Were they exceptional?'

'Certainly not representative,' I told him. Exceptionally intelligent, curious, and anxious to learn, I fancied. For the most part the people of that quarter seemed apathetic, stolid, not anxious to go beyond themselves and their affairs of everyday. He was so easy, stately, and condescending that I was rather in awe of him, and expressed myself somewhat hesitatingly.

'You must be good enough to let me know to whom I am indebted,' he said, when I had done speaking. He drew a card-case from his pocket, and we exchanged cards. He paused beneath a lamp and read my name and address aloud. 'John Denham, 10 Warwick Court, Gray's Inn.' A four-wheeled cab rumbled into the street; he hailed it, and it proved to be empty. 'You must let me set you down, Mr. Denham, if you are going homewards now.'

I accepted his invitation, and as we rode he persuaded me to talk. The rattling noise of the vehicle made conversation

difficult, and I had to shout at him, so that I felt impudent and noisy. When the driver pulled up at the entrance to Warwick Court Mr. Delamere shook me by the hand, expressed a desire to see more of me, promised to write in the course of a day or two, and then drove away.

In a day or two an invitation to dinner awaited me. Mr. Delamere expressed a hope that I might not be engaged for the specified day, and asked me, if I should be so, to appoint another date and give him a week's notice. I wrote at once to accept the invitation. I looked forward to the evening with a fluttered expectancy, and was rejoiced to think that I was about to set foot in literary and artistic London.

CHAPTER II

I THINK my chambers were amongst the tiniest in town. If there are less spacious apartments they are inhabited by people smaller of stature than the average Briton, or not inhabited at all. The bedroom was about the size of a Saratoga trunk, and the sitting-room was only a trifle larger. I was very happy there and very full of dreams and ambition, and I spent my days in pursuits more or less literary. I was not quite certain in what direction I was to blossom, but I had a modest certainty that I should flower out in one way or another, and become rich and famous — a delusion which I have found to be common amongst bookish young men of three or four-and-twenty. I

had written a three-act comedy, which no manager would so much as look at, and a five-canto poem, which no publisher would venture to introduce to an uninterested world; and in the course of a score or so of chapters I had got the characters of an intended novel into so unearthly a muddle of cross-purposes that I had thrown aside the whole thing in disgust, and for the time abandoned it. None of these things destroyed or abated the modest confidence already mentioned.

I was sitting in my own room an hour or two after the despatch of my answer to Mr. Delamere's invitation to dinner when I heard a noise of hammering overhead, and after responding to it by a vigorous employment of the poker on the brickwork of my fireplace, I threw open my outer door and awaited the arrival of the personage whose presence had been signalled. Above me dwelt a young man of seven-and-twenty—four years my senior—Walter Pole by name.

He had no occupation, and seemed in want of none; but he had a prodigious circle of acquaintances. He read a great deal, though how he found time to do it was something of a wonder, and he lounged through time with a solemn insouciance which some people found irritating and others charming. He was a good deal of an athlete and chose to disguise his activity by a pretence of idleness, propping himself up lazily against walls and doors with his head rolling idly, as if in quest of a restful corner, and his hands in his pockets. He and I were great chums, but he feigned to be too idle to walk downstairs to knock at my door like an ordinary Christian, and always demanded an answer to that noisy signal of his before he would take the trouble to descend.

On this occasion there was a pause between the signal and the sound of his steps upon the stair, and so, leaving the door open, I resumed my book and went on reading. In those happy days—it was the

spring of the year 1865—Charles Dickens was alive and at work, and the whole English-reading world was engaged with Mr. Silas Wegg and Mr. Nicodemus Boffin. I am aware now — on the authority of an American gentleman who ought to know—that since the great master's death fiction has grown to be a finer art than it was in his day, but somehow—whether with advancing years one's faculty for enjoyment grows duller, or whether the gilt has been rubbed off the fictional gingerbread by the defacing hand of Time, as it has been rubbed off gingerbread of so many other kinds—there comes nobody who delights me in his way. I would fain have the finer sorts of art which have grown up in the last score of years abolished, and the dead master back again; or—and the second wish seems likelier of fulfilment—would fain see some new man rising who would make me laugh and cry as he did, and as he still does whenever I look into his noble and delightful pages.

A new book from Dickens. Let elderly and middle-aged people remember what it meant, and let me enjoy myself for a minute as I recall that afternoon.

I forgot the signal and the open door, and I read on until the last page of the number was finished. Then I became aware that the fire was out, that the door was still open, that the dusk of the spring evening was falling fast, and that I was stiff and cold. I rang the bell to have the fire remade, and then walked upstairs to the first landing. The door was closed, but my chum answered to my knock, returning to his pocket as I entered the hand he had used to open it, and beckoning me indoors by a backward movement of his head.

'I was coming down,' he said, 'but I had a call just as I knocked to you. Do you fellows know each other?' We did not, and he introduced us to each other. 'Jones—Denham.'

Jones presented rather a striking figure.

He was taller than common—six feet two, I should say; he differed very much from what one's ideal Jones should look like; was magnificently moustached and bearded; he had jet-black Italian-looking eyes and an olive-coloured skin. His features were remarkably delicate and refined, and his long wavy hair was parted in the middle.

'I beg your pardon,' he said in a soft voice which had a faint suspicion of an un-English accent, 'but did I see your name upon the door-post as I came upstairs?'

'I live in the rooms below these,' I answered.

'Was it you who saved Delamere's life the other night?' he asked.

'Saved his life?'

'He certainly said so.'

'I saved his watch,' I said. 'I was lucky enough to hear him call out, and when I turned the corner the men who had attacked him ran away. I don't think his life was in any danger.'

'Well,' said the Italian-looking Jones, smoothing his glossy beard with a hand of beautiful whiteness and delicacy, 'he quite thinks he would have been killed if it had not been for the happy accident of your arrival; and he is, I assure you, boiling over with gratitude.'

Remembering Mr. Delamere's unusual coolness I was a little astonished at this, but I said nothing.

'The Delameres are great friends of mine,' continued Jones. 'Delamere is a remarkable man. He has never done half as much as he should have done, of course; but he stands aloof from modern art a good deal, and lives with the ideals of the past.'

With this a certain undefined uneasiness took possession of him, and in a little while began to develop oddly. He rose and poked the fire. He fidgeted with the gas, raising and lowering the flame of the burners. He strayed to the book-shelves, and there took down and opened a score of volumes, return-

ing each after an apparently unseeing glance at one of its pages. Pole, with one leg thrown across the other, followed these movements with a glance of some meaning, and once or twice the merest glimpse of a smile flickered across his face.

'What's the matter, Jones?' he asked after a while, when the other's signs of uneasiness had become so marked as to seem to call for some recognition.

Jones seemed to make up his mind, and then seemed to recoil from his determination, and then seemed to make up his mind again.

'Do you sketch at all, Pole? Do you paint?' he asked. 'Have you any sketching tools about? Anything will do.'

'No,' said Pole, 'I'm sorry to say I do nothing in that line. What is it that's a-hurting you, my boy? The divine afflatus?'

'I've an idea,' said Jones, wincing as if it hurt him to have this not too-pointed bit of fun poked at him. 'I want to get it down before it goes. Anything will do. A bit of

brown paper and a fragment of charcoal. Anything.'

'There's your brown paper,' returned Pole, opening a drawer and setting a sheet of paper on the table. 'And there's your material for charcoal.' He drew a packet of firewood from a locker, and cutting the string which surrounded it, thrust one of the pieces between the bars of the fire-place and left it there.

Jones pounced upon the paper, smoothed it with both hands upon the table, and then thrust a second stick between the bars.

'Don't let that burn too far,' he said; and drawing out the first, returned to the table, and with the burning bit of wood began to work all manner of preparatory eager signs with it, as though he were hungering to realise his idea.

Now at this time it was meat and drink to me to see an artist at work; and I arose to watch the Italian-looking Jones with an excited interest of a sort which hardly any

other spectacle in the world would have awakened in me. There was a glamour about an artist, even if he were a duffer, which no other earthly creature had about him. Jones, with that clumsily-shaped bit of charcoal, before the red sparks had fairly died out of it, began to draw with a feverish hurry and rapidity. Pole got ready one bit of charcoal for him whilst he used another; and in something under five minutes, as I should guess, a very beautiful and noble face was expressed upon the brown paper, and the artist threw himself into a chair and lit a cigarette. His eagerness to get the sketch made had seemed a little exaggerated, and now his indifference and laxness seemed a little overdone. I was young, and, as does not happen with every young man in the world, I knew it. I mistrusted my own experience, and yet I seemed to discover a something overdone in the Jonesian enthusiasm of desire and its rapidly followed exhaustion. Did artists really work in that

way? Were they so seized by an idea, and so incapable of resisting it? Or was Jones exceptionally gifted, or exceptionally susceptible, or was he a little bit of a hum——? I dared hardly complete the inquiry.

Pole stood over the table with his hands in his pockets and his head on one side, and looked enjoyingly at the drawing. For my own part I was a little staggered by the bold swiftness and dexterity with which this inspiration had been brought to life, but Pole's beaming face expressed a gratification so unusual for him that my doubts died, and I began to think that I was in the presence of a new Michael Angelo.

'I say,' said Pole, in his idle way, 'you must let me keep this, old fellow.'

'If you care for it,' Jones answered languidly. 'It's off my mind now. I've got it down and I can get it again whenever I want it.'

'You don't mean to say that you could

reproduce this inspiration accurately?' Pole asked him, still beaming at the drawing.

'Oh yes,' said the artist, with a careless modesty. 'You see,' he added, waking up a little, 'when an idea gets into the mind it offers itself sometimes in a will-o'-the-wispish, tantalising kind of way. It comes and goes, revealing itself in glimpses which are neither clear enough nor prolonged enough to make that kind of impression on the memory which is necessary to fix it. But if you can catch the tricksy thing and set it in form, no matter how roughly, it is your own property for good and all. The definite impression is secured—clearly stamped on the mind. I shall never forget that face again.'

He dropped back into languor, relit his extinguished cigarette, and smoked in silence. Two or three minutes later he arose, looked at his watch, took up his hat, and said good-bye.

'I think,' he added to me, 'that you dine at the Delameres on Monday?'

'I wrote to-day,' I answered, 'accepting.'

'We shall meet there,' he said; and with more good-byes he went away.

Pole, having closed the door behind him, came back at a waltz, and having circled the room twice or thrice, cannoned against a sofa and fell into it, laughing. Then he got up and looked at the charcoal drawing, and rubbed his hands and laughed again, with an enjoyment so genuine that I laughed with him.

'Here's a lark,' he said, still chuckling.

'Where is it?' I asked him.

'Here,' he answered; and opening a drawer below the book-shelves he drew out a sheaf of papers, from amongst which he produced a rough sheet of gray paper, such as grocers use, and holding it before me, displayed to my astonished vision an absolute replica of the drawing which had just been executed in my presence. He set the two side by side, and we examined them together. They looked almost as if they

might have been produced from the same lithographic stone.

'What is this?' I asked; 'a coincidence?'

'Yes,' said Pole, turning on me with a delicious grin of mischief, 'a coincidence. Do you know Wilson Craig? No? He's a far-off cousin of mine—Scotchman. Poor Sebastian had the same idea at Craig's only a week ago. He was tormented by it; was obliged to get it out. If you can once catch the tricksy thing, you know, it's your own property for good and all. But it comes and goes, my boy, revealing itself in glimpses which are neither clear enough nor prolonged enough to make that kind of impression on the memory which is necessary to fix it.'

'Sebastian?' I asked. 'Who is Sebastian?'

'Sebastian? Sebastian is Jones. Sebastian Dolmer Jones. His name has been a damage to him. If his godfathers and godmothers at his baptism had seen to it that

he should be called Bill, or Dick, or Tom, or Harry, it would have been a blessing for him. But Sebastian Dolmer's bound to be a bit out of the way, and to have artistic cranks and furies, don't you see! Sebastian Dolmer can't even speak his native tongue without a little bit of foreign accent. How should he? Bill Jones could have done it, or Dick, Tom, or Harry, but Sebastian and Dolmer couldn't manage it between 'em though they tried ever so. Thank your stars you're plain John, my boy.'

I felt a vicarious shame. I would greatly have preferred that Jones should not have been bowled out in this ignominious way. Pole's rejoicing at it seemed cruel and unfair.

'Rubbish!' said he, when I put this before him. 'The only advantage this kind of humbug brings with it is that a man can laugh at it. What do you think pretence exists for, unless to be found out and laughed at? You're going to dine with the Dela-

meres, are you? Then you're going into the very nursery and citadel of humbug. The dinner's real and the wines are real. Plates, knives, forks, spoons, chairs, tables, white ties, shirt-fronts, dress-coats, all real. But the people and the sentiments! Keep Sebastian Dolmer in your mind, John. There's a lot of Sebastian Dolmer in the enlightened converse of the Delameres. But whenever you hear it your safeguard is to say "Jones" to yourself. Look here!' He became quite hot upon a sudden, and struck the table, leaning across it and looking me straight in the eyes. 'I'll tell you what you'll find there. You'll find the sham enthusiast in art, who doesn't know a Rubens from a Vandyke; and the sham enthusiast in humanity, who wouldn't part with sixpence to save you from starvation; and the sham enthusiast in friendship, who'll stick pins and needles in a wax caricature of you when you're gone; and the sham enthusiast in the last new fad of atheism, who's deadly afraid of ghosts and

says his prayers on the sly; and the sham enthusiast in poetry, who's as wooden under her wooden simper as this wooden table. They tremble with sensitiveness, every man Jack and woman Jill of them, and they're just as tough-hided as a lot of camels. They're boiling over with sympathies of all sorts if you listen to 'em, and they're dryer than the desert sand. Look at this!' He snatched the drawing vehemently from the table and held it up before me. 'Why can't plain Jones come here and say, "I'm just itching all over to show you how practised and dexterous I am. There's a rapid bit of certainty for you! And now I've staggered you I'm happy!" Vanity's a natural passion, and, like all natural passions, it's useful whilst you've got the bit in its mouth and the reins in your hands. But the beggar comes Sebastian Dolmering with his stale old inspiration, and turns his own cleverness into a shameful lie.'

'They can't all be like that,' I hesitated.

The fancy made my head ache. I was young and ingenuous, and I wanted to believe in people.

'Go and dine with the Delameres,' he answered, still speaking hotly, 'and then tell me how far I'm wrong.'

CHAPTER III

I WENT to dine with the Delameres, and whilst I dressed and whilst I was on the way I felt as if I were somehow on a mean errand —as if I were going to spy out the defects of my host and *convives*, and find out each one of them in a false enthusiasm. I had no right to accept a man's hospitality on those conditions, and the dinner began to take the aspect of an ordeal. It seemed especially terrible to face Jones, whom I already knew to be a pretender. He would probably go on pretending, and I should have to look and listen and to pretend to be deceived by his pretensions. As we get older we take a more humorous or a more allowing view of human foibles, unless we happen

to have been so bitterly wounded by them in our sensitive days that the whole world grows hateful; but there is nothing so hopeless and mournful to the heart of an ingenuous lad than the beginning of disbelief in his fellow-mortals.

I was partly relieved and cheered by an unexpected encounter at the door of Mr. Delamere's house in Cromwell Terrace. A little old gentleman was in the act of discharging a hansom there as I drove up, and as he stood on tiptoe to reach the outstretched hand of the cabman I recognised him. This little old gentleman was the Reverend Dr. Fish, an old friend of my father's and a great favourite of mine. There was a good fat vicarage in my native Warwickshire village, and Dr. Fish had held it for many years. In his old age he had allowed himself to be transplanted to London, chiefly in order to make room for his son, who had taken the living the Doctor had vacated.

'Ha, John, my boy,' said the Doctor, as

I alighted and stood waiting by him at Mr. Delamere's door. 'I expected to meet you here.' He was silent when a man-servant opened the door, and whilst we disembarrassed ourselves of hats and coats, but when we had mounted the stairs and found ourselves alone in the drawing-room he began to speak again. 'I heard of your gallant conduct the other night. Delamere mentioned it to me, and—you mustn't be offended, John—he talked about doing something for you. He has a weakness for patronage. I told him, of course, that that would never do, and told him who you were, and so on, and as a matter of fact you are here under my recommendation. Delightful people—delightful people—but curiously exclusive.'

I was on the point of saying that I had been surprised to find him there, but remembering that Mr. Delamere's opinions about religion afforded me my only grounds for surprise I kept a judicious silence. The old Doctor, with his eyes beaming bene-

volently behind his gold-rimmed glasses, and his soft old face alight with friendship and amiability, touched the theme which was in my mind.

'They are, as I said just now, delightful people, but I am not sure that some of them may not be a little dangerous if placed in contact with a mind not altogether formed. They have curious opinions, even reprehensible opinions sometimes, some of them. There's that book of Seeley's, and there's that other book of Renan's. They are not works which I would recommend a young man to study; but after all, you know, John, we must know doubt to fight it, and I find Mr. Delamere a kind of mental tonic.'

It was plain that Dr. Fish felt it necessary to justify his presence there. 'You don't know Miss Delamere yet?' he went on. 'Of course not. Of course not. A very superior young lady, a very charming young lady. Perhaps a little over-educated. I am no friend to these new-fangled notions about

female education, but she wears her learning lightly, and she is certainly very charming.'

Mr. Delamere appeared and welcomed me very agreeably. The guests began to drop in, amongst them Jones, whom I greeted with a wretched consciousness of embarrassment, being afraid, though I knew how unreasonable the fear was, that he was somehow aware of my knowledge of him, and thinking all the while how hideously ashamed he would have been if he were aware of my discovery. I was introduced to an American lady who was assuredly old enough to be my mother; a lady who wrote poetry, and blushed and simpered behind her fan like the dear young creature she had been thirty years earlier, and made my life a burden to me whilst I tried to talk to her. Then I was introduced to a tall and stately foreigner, who left me abruptly to talk to a fat woman in red, who received him with a shrill ecstasy; and then, whilst I was rather forlornly turning over the leaves of a book of engravings, a

lady who commanded my instant attention sailed into the room, and moved from one to another with salutations and welcome and apology for being late. There were more reasons than one for looking at her, for, to begin with, she was very strikingly beautiful and graceful, and dressed with a taste which, though I was then even more ignorant in such matters than I am now—and that is saying a great deal—seemed to me altogether exquisite. But the thing that enlisted my attention was this. The fourth drawing of that suite of five which Mr. Delamere had executed upon the black board at the lecture for the Moral Tone Association had been neither more nor less than an accurate reproduction of Miss Delamere's face. I could not help thinking that in a person of Mr. Delamere's reputation there was something wanting in good feeling and delicacy in having drawn his daughter's features for the instruction and amusement of that mechanical crowd, and when I came to remember the

comments on the fifth drawing and his cold-blooded artistic improvement on his child's features, I felt for the moment as if I hated him. But Mr. Delamere himself carrying me up to his daughter and introducing me to her as the hero of his adventure of a week ago, and making much of me to her in spite of some feeble protest of my own, I had no time to pursue my thoughts of him. When it appeared that I was set apart to take Miss Delamere down to dinner, and when it appeared further that everybody was impressed with an absurdly untrue idea of my courage and usefulness on the night of the attack, I resigned myself for a while in a kind of stupor. Pole's denunciation of the Delameres and their set of friends and acquaintances was with me for an hour and more, and nothing but my beautiful neighbour's easy charm of manner drew me away from the memory of it.

Mary Delamere was two years younger than myself. She had a perfect self-posses-

sion, and a distinguishing quietude of manner which would have become a princess. She was very beautiful, and in her quiet kind way did so much to put me at my ease that I became grateful to her and was not long in arriving at the conclusion that, whatever brand of insincerity might have been marked upon the rest of the people there present, she herself was as honest as daylight. Nothing about her pleased me so much as the soft, sincere serenity of her manner—a something so gentle and engaging that I have no words for it. One used to hear—for phrases come into fashion and go out again as clothes do—a good deal of the eyes as the windows of the soul. I never knew anybody of whom the saying seemed as true as it did of Mary Delamere. Candour lived in those large gray orbs of hers. They were not made to hide deceit. Before the evening was over I was ready to fight anything or anybody in defence of that belief.

Perhaps if it had not been for Pole's dia-

tribe of a day or two earlier I might have been more disposed to believe in the sincerity of other people at the table. There was a lady opposite to me who talked of her poor dear Hottentots in tones of greatest affection, and as though she owned the nation, but I never learned in what relation she and the poor dear Hottentots stood to each other, or on what ground she made them hers. A long-haired, clean-shaven man sat beside her and held the table spell-bound for a while as he spoke of the desecration of a Turner which was in the possession of a titled acquaintance.

'They had had it cleaned, Delamere,' he said with a voice and manner of resigned despair. 'All that lovely impasto architectural stuff turns out to have been built up in white and glazed. They have cleaned the glaze away, and now the thing stares at you, with the middle distance hanging over the foreground—a forlorn line of dirty chalk. I could have cried with anger. I could posi-

tively have shed tears of mortification. I could indeed.'

The long-haired, clean-shaven man made this protestation with a sort of reserve, as if he would rather that we didn't think too highly of him for it.

Jones said it was heart-breaking, absolutely heart-breaking, and (as an aside to the man behind his chair) that he would take a little currant-jelly.

I caught Miss Delamere's eye at this moment, and was guilty of a youthful impertinence of that sort which is only perpetrated by shy people, who, as a matter of fact, say and do, in their own desperation, the most impudent things which are said and done in the world. I asked why the gentleman didn't cry, if he wanted to. Her eyes laughed, but she held up a warning finger.

'You must not say that sort of thing,' she answered. 'It is not good form.'

I was horribly disconcerted, and for a while found nothing else to say. The man had

irritated me. I was persuaded that he had cared less about the Turner than I should have done myself, and that he had only mentioned its destruction in order to show how delicately-toned he was, and what a love for art he had. But of course I had no least little right to ridicule her father's guests to the lady of the house, and I told myself that nobody but a cad could have dreamed of making that unfortunate observation. Yet Pole's opinion of the people was working in me, and I had been embarrassed by the wilful exaggeration of my own accidental service, and Jones's trick of being inspired with the same urgent fancy twice running was present in my mind, and I seemed to breathe an atmosphere of humbug which stifled me.

I suppose Miss Delamere saw my embarrassment and took pity upon me.

'You live in Gray's Inn, I think, Mr. Denham?'

'Not actually within the Inn,' I answered,

determining that I at least would be precise. 'In Warwick Court, just outside the Inn gates.'

'Do you happen to know a Mr. Pole, who lives there?' she asked me.

'Very well indeed,' I answered, not much relieved from my discomfiture by the introduction of his name.

'He was a great friend of ours until a little while ago,' she said. 'He used to be very enthusiastic at times about art, and books, and politics, and we thought he had a career of some sort before him. Is he—you know him well, you say—is he changeable?'

I thought not. He pretended to be lazy; but what with his friends, and his books, and his athletics, he must always have his hands full.

'Oh yes,' she said, 'I know that way of his, but I was not thinking of that. There are a great many young men who are ashamed of being thought enthusiastic, and he is one

of them. He used to come here very often, and my father had become attached to him, but somehow he has drifted away. I should be obliged if you would tell him that he was asked for. You must understand,' she added brightly, 'that he and I are friends of fifteen years' standing, and that I have old-established rights to an interest in him.'

It was clearly impossible to say what I knew of his reasons for staying away, but I promised as lightly as I could to convey her message. Then I began to wonder whether Pole had included this delightful young lady in his condemnation of her father's guests.

'They can't all be like that,' I had said to him when he had done with Jones.

'Go and dine with the Delameres,' he had answered, 'and see how far I am wrong.'

And now, bent on discovery, and quite certain that if he attacked Miss Delamere with the rest then I should be able to confute him, I watched my chance. Somebody spoke of the civilising influences of art. Art seemed

the Delamere gospel—the tidings of joy to an ugly world—the only possible redemption of men and women lay in it.

'Don't you think it easy,' I asked her, 'to over-estimate the things that art is going to do for the world? Isn't there at least a little danger of falling into a sort of cant about it?'

She looked at me with a surprised smile.

'Do you know,' she said, with that patronising air which young women can always assume so successfully with men who are but little older than themselves, 'I was at first inclined to think you shy, Mr. Denham? But you are a very bold person indeed if you dare to ventilate that doctrine here.'

'But really,' I stammered, 'it all sounds wild to me. I—I won't speak of it, if I must not, but——'

'Let us talk of it later,' she said. 'Colonel Seaforth is talking. He is always worth listening to.'

The possibility that this speech included a counter-proposition to the effect that I was not worth listening to so weighed upon me that I lost the first part of Colonel Seaforth's speech. When I was able to listen I found he was telling a story of a comrade who died before the Redan. Nothing could have been better than the manner of his narrative, nothing very well more affecting than its matter. I was ashamed of my own eyes, and made a pretence of eating to disguise myself.

'What a theme for a poem!' said the American lady, clasping her hands together. 'Oh, may I use it, Colonel Seaforth? May I?'

'I should prefer the theme in marble,' said the clean-shaven man. 'I can see the cold, inscrutable calm of the dead face.'

'No, no, Cumming,' said our host, shaking his head with a grave decision. 'You forget the costume.'

'You are quite right, Delamere,' returned

the clean-shaven man. 'I forgot the costume. Language *is* the medium for it, after all. It is one of the themes in which omission becomes the chief artistic virtue.'

So they forgot the hero in the space of ten seconds, and the lady opposite was reminded by the story of something which had happened amongst the poor dear Hottentots, and had no earthly bearing upon it, so far as I could discover.

The dinner came to an end, and when coffee had been served the men followed the ladies upstairs. There was some excellent music, and a great deal of desultory clever talk, and then people began to go. No further chance presented itself for talk with Miss Delamere, and when I came to think of it I seemed to have acquitted myself so ill with her that I did not dare to make an opportunity. I had been insolent about one of her father's guests, and I had accused the whole table of the vice of cant, and altogether the sooner I hid my head in shame the better

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it seemed likely to be for me. I took advantage of Dr. Fish's farewells to shelter my own, and much to my surprise found Miss Delamere's cordiality in no way diminished.

'We are at home on Fridays,' she said kindly, 'from nine in the evening. Come next Friday, and bring Mr. Pole with you. Will you?'

I promised for myself, and said I would bring Pole if I could. She raised her eyebrows in reproof for what I knew to be a kind of *gaucherie*, and I got away covered with confusion.

'Pole?' said the old Vicar, when we reached the street together. 'Walter Pole? Are you a friend of his? I used to meet him at the Delameres'. A bright young fellow of high principle, I always fancied. I used to think—oh, well, that's no business of mine.'

We walked to the street corner together and there separated, each taking a hansom. Pole was in his own rooms when I got home,

and, hearing me enter, came down in his dressing-gown and slippers.

'Well,' he asked me, 'what do you think of 'em?'

I didn't know. I was weary and dispirited. I told him with a little heat, when I began to talk at last, that he had spoiled my evening for me, and that I believed them to be a deal nicer and more genuine than he thought them. I believe I charged him, in my own mind, with the three failures of which I had been guilty.

'I suppose,' I said at last, 'that you don't include Miss Delamere among the sham enthusiasts. I don't think I ever met a more delightful girl.'

'Miss Delamere's another pair of shoes, John,' he answered. 'I wasn't talking of Miss Delamere.'

I told him of the invitation I had for him, and in his own idle way he began to beat the half-extinguished fire with the poker.

'Yes,' he said drawlingly, poising the

poker in his hand, 'I think I'll go.' Then he dropped the poker with a crash in the fender, and said with startling emphasis, 'I'll be hanged if I do.' And with that he got up and marched away, leaving me staring after him.

CHAPTER IV

Pole sauntered into my rooms on Friday evening just as I was making ready to start for Mr. Delamere's house. I had not seen him since his curious exit, but I had sent him a note asking him to provide me with some excuse or message in case he should be inquired after.

'So you're going, are you?' he demanded.

'Yes, I'm going. What am I to say to Miss Delamere?'

'I suppose,' he said, propping himself against the bedroom door and lounging there, 'that the straightest thing to say will be that I wouldn't go.'

I put it to him that that was an unamiable message for a friend to deliver. He shrugged

his shoulders and rolled about against the door for a time with a manner which seemed to disclaim responsibility.

'If you like to invent any social lie you may, my boy, but I'm not going to save your conscience by inventing it for you. Say you tried to persuade me and failed. Is that too hard for you?'

'Do you want to make enemies of them?' I asked.

'Enemies or friends—it is all one to me,' he answered. 'I don't suppose they'll care greatly whether I go or not, and I'm sure I shan't care much how they take it.'

'There are thousands of people in the world for whom one doesn't greatly care,' I urged; 'but one doesn't go out of the way to wound them. You might send a civiler message.'

'If old Delamere asks for me,' said Pole, 'you can tell him that I think and speak of him with a constant want of respect and veneration. If Miss Delamere should do me

the honour to call me to mind again, you may tell her that I'm sorry not to be able to meet her.'

Finding that I could make nothing better of him than this I set out, and arriving at Cromwell Terrace in due time found the rooms already fairly filled. Miss Delamere shook hands with me, and afterwards I got into a corner and sat dull and resigned, knowing nobody and noticed by nobody. The rooms were filled with a loud buzz of talk; and I saw so many introductions going on that it seemed as if nobody knew anybody except the host and his daughter. After the space of an hour Miss Delamere found me out and sat down beside me.

'You did not bring Mr. Pole?' she asked. 'I suppose that you have seen him?'

'Oh yes; I have seen him.' A sudden awkwardness fell upon me, and Miss Delamere, who was toying with her fan, looked up and became immediately aware of my embarrassment.

'He refused to come?' she said. 'Did he give a reason for it?'

I began to stammer something, but she stopped me almost at once. She made no display of temper or confusion or indifference.

'Will you tell me actually what he said?' Then seeing that I grew more embarrassed than before—for I knew that I was making a foolish effort to smile in an allowing sort of way for Pole, and an apologetic way for myself, and failing horribly—she added, 'Never mind, Mr. Denham. I ought not to have asked you. I shall be right in thinking it was not pleasant or friendly. Now let us talk of something else. Do you care about celebrities? That is Mr. Cushing—the gentleman with the eye-glass and the black ribbon—the author of *The Spider*. Have you read it? No? People are talking about it a great deal. That is——' and so on through half a dozen.

They were all people with whose names I was more or less familiar, and it was interest-

ing to see them for the first time. I had forgotten Pole for the moment and the discomfiture his purposed absence had brought upon me, when Miss Delamere brought him back to memory.

'Have you known Mr. Pole long?' she asked. I told her I had known him pretty intimately for a year. 'You like him?' Yes. I liked him much. I felt as if this avowal were a sort of tacit expression of approval of his want of politeness in her case, and made it awkwardly. I thought at the time, and I knew later on, that she understood me, but she pursued her questioning. 'He is not natively impolite, I fancy?' I thought not. Brusque, perhaps, but too kindly to be insolent or ill-bred. 'Shall I introduce you to Mr. Cushing? I must go now, for I see more people coming, and I have to receive them. Oh! Here is Mr. Jones. You know him already. Sebastian, I leave you and Mr. Denham to each other.'

Jones sat beside me in the place she

vacated and began to talk, but I could see that his heart was not in it, and that he was somehow distracted. He appeared to be more interested in his own coat than men commonly are, and sat plucking at his sleeves with delicate thumb and forefinger until I made a discovery which I suppose I ought to have made much earlier. Jones was not attired in absolute black, as other men were, but had had his clothes cut out of very dark claret colour. When he was sure that my observation was attracted by this fact he mentioned it.

'You are looking at my coat? It's something of an innovation, and I dare say that one may be laughed at for it. But really one finds the monotony of English dress oppressive, and evening dress has quite grown beyond one's power of endurance. One has been looking for some sort of moral Curtius to throw himself into the gulf for years past, and since one can't find him one must sacrifice oneself.'

He invested the theme with a certain air of lightness. Since that time I have seen men jest under fire in the same spirit. I could see that he felt the seriousness of the position.

'Somebody has to lead the way, and of course it doesn't do to be too bold at first. One may find somebody to follow one's lead, or even to go beyond it. The thing once started may make strides. One doesn't know. But really it *seems* impossible that men should be content to go on for ever in the present monotony of hideousness.'

I began to take an interest in Jones. The artistic humbug with which he had chosen to mark the beginning of my knowledge of him had made him noticeable, and this new development, which seemed to be so admirably in consonance with the first, helped to make him worthy of study. For the first time in my life I began consciously to try to see inside a man, to appreciate his standpoint, to endeavour to see how he saw things,

and what kind of opinion of himself supported him. It struck me that since I was perilously near to hating and despising him, and since he was perilously near to self-worship, it might be worth while to study him, if only with an eye to reconciling the difference and striking a reasonable balance. You have a right to be grateful to the man who sets you upon any new field of mental effort, and I have to thank Jones for many happy hours.

I began to observe him closely. He was very far from being uncomely, and, so far as I could discover, there was nothing in the way of warning in his face. He had very fine, soft, dark, Italian eyes, faithful and sincere to look at, with just such a patient longing in them as you may see in an intelligent and affectionate dog's. His moustache hid his mouth, but his forehead seemed to express honesty and candour. Nothing but a slight pinching of the nostrils betrayed any poverty of nature or littleness of sentiment. Some-

thing of coxcombry and affectation could be traced in his manner, but not enough to offend, unless you were somewhat too readily disposed to be offended.

'Delamere quite desponds,' he said, clinging to his theme. 'But then Delamere is elderly: he is getting on in life, and one doesn't expect to find the enthusiasm of hope in a man of his years. I dare say, now, you take this for a sort of ridiculous trifling; but really it isn't so if one looks rightly at it. When beautiful dress was a part of every gentleman's duty the arts flourished as they have never flourished since. Every assemblage of ladies and gentlemen afforded the eye a feast of delicate and rich colouring. The popular taste was educated to colour, and to us who look upon tone and form as the elementary civilising influence, the question of dress assumes an importance which, of course, it cannot wear to those who do not share our convictions. To dress with grace and refinement is one of the

ways to thinking and living with grace and refinement.'

Whilst Jones was talking thus Mr. Delamere appeared in our neighbourhood, and taking a chair which happened to be vacant near at hand, drew it up to the sofa upon which we sat, and placed himself before us.

'Nobody would think,' he said, striking in here, 'of disputing that proposition, but really we are at such a period of decadence that ——' He paused with an air of dejection, but brightened a moment later. 'I don't know,' he went on. '"When things are at their worst they sometimes mend." Perhaps we may really hope for a rebound from all this. The popular taste can never be finally depraved.'

'Everything seems to move in grooves,' said Jones seriously. 'We have our cycle of ugliness with us now. We shall move out of it by and by.'

'I'm not sure,' said Mr. Delamere, putting up a pair of gold-rimmed glasses, the better

to scrutinise Jones's raiment, 'that the point of departure is well chosen. You see, Sebastian, that if you push your point to its legitimate conclusion, you may arrive—you must arrive—at golds, and reds, and blues. Now the question comes, Will the material and the form lend themselves to a richly coloured treatment? To my mind, that question carries its own answer.'

'I have thought it out, sir,' Jones answered, with a respectful firmness of demeanour. 'If we desire to move the crowd we must have their good-will. To be moved too suddenly is shocking. The material is too important, too solidly fixed as it were, to be tampered with at first without danger. A slight deviation in colour—a mere hint of movement in the right direction—can give no shock, whilst it may invite attention.'

'Of course, returned Mr. Delamere, 'one has not spent sixty years in the world without learning patience, but even now the

narrow-mindedness, the extreme limitation of vision, which characterises some of the best-meaning people one encounters, is a little trying. I was speaking of this very theme the other night at the Trelawneys', and a gentleman whose name I have forgotten—he turned out to be a medical man of some eminence—chose to be mightily satirical. I remember now, a Doctor Brand, a disorderly giant of a man; a man, I should say, judging from what I saw of him, of excellent capacities. He thought the soap-boiler a more practical person to encourage in the cause of civilisation than the costumier. He put it rather well, but "My dear sir," I said, "*chacun à son métier*. Let us all work together. Let us welcome anything that helps. Soap and the scrubbing-brush by all means, but then I do not deal in soap and scrubbing-brushes." I heard him afterwards —he is a loud man, not too well-bred, and one can hear him over a whole room—and he was talking of fiddling and Rome burning,

and that sort of thing. He found some listeners, too.'

'There is no popular art-feeling,' said Jones. 'There is no conception of the necessity of an awaking.'

I thought of many things, but then I knew how young I was, and I kept silence. Mr. Delamere took up his parable anew.

'I am a little tired,' he said. 'One doesn't sacrifice one's conclusions any the more for being tired, but I confess to a little fatigue. There are none blinder than those who won't see, and people will *not* see that to be ugly is to be immoral. They have to see that two and two make four. That is a matter of the counting-house, and must be remembered in the purchase of the daily loaf. But they are quite sunk in stupor about everything that does not relate to their hateful daily comforts. One moves them for a moment—even in Houndsditch'—he looked at me—'one finds people who will listen; but they go to sleep again.'

'One would hardly think, sir,' said Jones with a mournful appeal, 'that you would shrink from lending the weight of your own example to a movement of this sort.' He shook his claret-coloured sleeve, and looked almost hopelessly at Delamere.

'I do not disapprove of it,' said he solemnly. 'It is well meant, Sebastian, and it may bear fruit beyond your expectations. But I am too old, a little too much daunted by futile experiment, too saddened by repeated failure. Youth has the vitality for experiment. By the way, I must show you my last bit of Worcester, Sebastian. Are you interested in china, Mr. Denham?'

I was on the edge of some idiotic rejoinder about the Opium traffic, but I understood in time, and saved myself. Mr. Delamere piloted us downstairs and showed us a cabinet, with most of the contents of which Jones was evidently familiar. My host, delicately handling some of its treasures, grew extremely eloquent and interesting.

'He probably knows more about old Worcester than any man alive,' said Jones, when we were left to ourselves again by the chance intrusion of other guests. 'His learning is prodigious.'

I went away dazed that night. I felt somehow as if I had been beaten about the head. My wits were scattered and I did not get at them easily. This solemn air of going crusading about the colour of a coat and a pair of trousers, this prodigy of learning in old crockery-ware, fairly stupefied me. I walked alone, and my soul rebelled at it all. This huge London, said I hotly to myself, lies sweltering about them, noble and loathly, all comedy and tragedy, and they turn their backs upon it, and blind themselves from the sight of it, and find their souls' bread in bric-à-brac and the wine of life in the distillation of the fashion plates. And I thought myself particularly clever, and felt that I was great and magnanimous and altogether what I ought to be by comparison with these triflers, and

got into a very satisfactory state of mind by reason of them. But if I thought poorly of the great art critic himself or of Jones his pupil, I had formed, without knowing any very sound reasons for it, a different opinion with regard to Mr. Delamere's daughter. I do not pride myself upon any special discernment on this account, for a boy's judgment about a young woman is liable to be influenced by facts of which he takes no count. Mary Delamere was, to begin with, a very beautiful girl, and, to continue, she was to my mind, even in her personal aspect, better than beautiful. I thought I read nothing but candour and goodness in her looks, and if for once I was right, it is not a thing to be greatly proud of. I have thought the same things since, and have been wrong, and it would be a worse world than it is, if all the eyes that look sincere and honest were the loopholes through which mean natures peered to spy their own advantage, and all the unwrinkled foreheads and blooming cheeks

and laughing lips were no better than pretty disguises. Here and there in the world, in the middle of all the chicane and frivolity, and that pitiless icy selfishness which is the deadliest because the commonest of human crimes, you find a nature so honest, so true, so gentle and tender, that your only way with it is to love it and worship it and wonder at its goodness. And you are a lucky man if its very goodness does not sometimes make your heart ache.

CHAPTER V

I HAD no need to discover that Mr. Delamere and Sebastian Jones were not wholly given over to the demon of hollowness. Mr. Delamere's books held a good deal of sound thinking and admirable writing, and Jones's pictures were visible to prove his faculty of imagination, and to show that he could draw and paint what he had imagined. But what with Pole's emphatic condemnation of them —which carried great weight with me at the time—and my own small discoveries and observations, I should have fallen away from them altogether if it had not been for the fact of Mary Delamere's influence. I do not think that I was ever in love with her, though I might have gone that length but

for another's unconscious intervention; but from the first I admired her and revered her, and credited her with all imaginable good qualities. It was so great a pleasure to meet her that it more than atoned to me for the impotent exasperation I felt in the presence of Jones, and the bewildering contempt with which Jones's friend and patron inspired me.

It was, then, entirely upon Miss Delamere's account that I kept up my acquaintance with her father, and consented to give his halls the benefit of my presence, and his society my carefully-disguised contempt. But I should never have known in its details the story I am about to tell if it had not been for one or two accidental circumstances, such as are always happening in life to jostle us out of the road upon which we fancy that our feet are set, and into new roads upon which we had never the remotest intention of travelling.

Mr. Delamere's out-of-season entertain-

ments and receptions came to an end. The entertainments and receptions of the season, which were of a much more exalted and magnificent description, were suddenly, according to annual fashion, arrested, and in mid-May the house in Cromwell Terrace was closed and the family went abroad, accompanied, as I learned, by Jones. Mr. Delamere found a certain spell of Continental life per year quite necessary for him, and he preferred to take it when the winter health-seekers were all gone home, or going, and before the arrival of the annual summer and autumn crowd of tourists. He liked to have the foreign galleries to himself as far as possible, and always, wherever he might be, he had a sort of haughty and tolerant patience for the crowd. He spent his life in directing the vulgar gaze towards objects of art, and he resented, in his polished and gentlemanly way, the presence of the people he so constantly and eloquently invited.

Pole and I, having nothing better to do,

went up river and lived aboard a hired house-boat. The business arrangements which had been necessary before we took possession of our summer-house were entirely carried out by Pole. I knew nothing about the boat until we entered upon it beyond the fact that it belonged to 'old Goldsmith,' that we paid forty pounds for its use during the summer season, and that during the regatta week at Henley its proprietor would expect to have leave to quarter himself upon us. I had that vague and general idea of old Goldsmith which people gather of men they have heard of and never seen, and it naturally happened that when he presented himself in the flesh he proved to be the exact opposite of what I had imagined.

I remember the day perfectly. I have reasons for that exactitude of memory, as will in due course appear. It was broiling hot, and in the first week of June. The river was low, and the clayey bank beside which the house-boat was moored was already

fissured with the heat, and its baking cracks gaped like so many Tantalus mouths above the water, which flowed so near and so unreachable. I was half asleep in the dingey, and Pole was lounging on the deck, making the shallowest possible pretence of reading Roman law, when a movement on his part awoke me from my dreams, and he murmured softly to himself—

'Now what on earth does that old scoundrel want here?'

'Which old scoundrel?' I demanded sleepily.

'That old scoundrel!' said Pole, nodding his head backward. 'Old Goldsmith.'

I rolled over in the dingey and, with my elbows on the stern seat, looked down the river in the direction indicated by Pole's nod. On the smooth, mirror-like expanse of the river there was but a single craft, and seated in it, holding a tiller-rope in either hand, was a fat, contented-looking young man of undeniably Jewish aspect. His black eyes

gleamed and his fat cheeks creased, and his Hebrew nose wrinkled in a smile of recognition, as the boat, impelled by a sun-burned waterman, whose neck and arms were of the colour of a new-baked brick, bore down upon us. His white teeth, which looked the whiter by contrast with the jetty little moustache curling above them, held the stump of a fat cigar. He was dressed in white boating flannels, and a huge cable of watch-chain ran from one breast pocket of his flannel coat to the other. The plump hands that twirled the tiller-ropes were all over rings. His diamonds gleamed, his watch-chain gleamed, the black eyes and white teeth shone as he bore down; he seemed to shine all over; and what with the bright daylight and the sunny river, and this opulent glitter of the new-comer, the effect on my sleepy eyes was altogether dazzling.

'Halloa!' said the new-comer, as he stepped aboard with a dapper dexterity. 'Here you are.'

'Yes,' said Pole, casting a lazy eye at him from under the rim of his straw hat, and speaking with a conspicuous absence of welcome in his tone; 'here we are. Who's a-denying of it?'

The new-comer stooped to the boatman and handed him a coin.

'This won't do!' said the boatman. 'I want a shillin'.'

'He wants a shilling!' The new man appealed to me. 'Did you ever hear such a thing? Why do you want a shilling? What do you want a shilling for?'

'Why? 'Cos it's the regular charge. What for? Why, for scullin' you up here.'

'Upon my word!' said the new man, still appealing to me—Pole had gone back to his pretended study of Roman law again—'I'm always being got at. Everybody gets at me. There you are; that's a sixpence. Go and revel on it, go and revel!'

His voice stopped half-way in his hooked

nose, and all his n's sounded like d's. He laughed with a delightful cunning and self-approval, and his black eyes and white teeth twinkled more brightly than before.

'It's beastly hot,' said the waterman, wiping his tanned forehead with his red forearm. 'Twopence wouldn't break a gentleman like you, would it, Mr. Goldsmith?'

'What a wandering style of conversation!' cried Mr. Goldsmith. 'What's the connection between the heat and twopence?' He pulled out an ostentatious handful of gold and silver, and turned it over from one hand to the other, facetiously blowing upon it, as if to sever the wheat from the chaff, and showing to me and the boatman some thirty or forty sovereigns. I saw the glittering eye look at me to remark if I had noticed this little Pactolus as it flowed jingling to and fro with metallic ripple. 'I haven't got twopence. D'ye think a gentleman carries coppers about with him? There's a three-penny-bit for you. Upon my word every-

body makes a mark at me, and everybody brings me down. I'm not half active on the wing. I can't escape 'em.'

I had never met so merry and so self-satisfied a young gentleman. He fairly beamed with self-approval; and he smiled and smiled at the smiling boatman, who seemed to recognise a certain humour in him, until the latter disappeared round the bend of the river. Then the gay young gentleman leaned over Pole and slapped him on the shoulder.

'What brings you here?' asked Pole, without looking at him.

'A little bit of pleasure. A little bit of business,' he responded gaily, seeming in nowise disconcerted by the evident coolness of his reception.

'Well, get both of them over,' said Pole, rising and sauntering into the house-boat. The smiling Jew followed him, and by and by I heard Pole asking for pen and ink.

I confess that though I tried not to be

curious I did not succeed to my own complete satisfaction. The jingle of money within the boat made me fancy that some part of Mr. Goldsmith's belongings were passing to Pole. I cast the dingey loose and sculled idly over to the other side of the river to avoid hearing more. Pole was supposed to have a good deal of money of his own, and I did not understand what was going on at all. It was obviously none of my business, but I would a great deal rather have believed that Pole had nothing in the way of borrowing to do with the smiling young personage, and yet it seemed from that jingling of coin and that asking for pen and ink, as if money were changing hands between them. Then I bethought me that though I had paid my half of the house-boat rent beforehand, Pole might not until now have settled with the owner, and so dismissed the matter from my mind.

My companion and his visitor shortly afterwards appearing on the outer deck of

the house-boat, I sculled back again. Pole was grave and silent—but he was often grave and silent, and it was his manner to seem constantly self-possessed. I could not avoid a feeling that something of importance had happened; but the sense of it was only in the air, and there was nothing to give the fancy solidity or shape.

'If you'll wait here awhile,' said Pole, turning on Goldsmith, 'I'll go up to town with you.'

'All right,' he responded cheerfully. 'I've got to take two or three petticoats to see Bedford and Toole in the Pauly-Tooley-Technic Entertainment, and I want to get back again. Stunning funny name, ain't it? Pauly-Tooley-Technic. Bedford's name is Paul, you know — Polytechnic. See the joke?'

'Yes,' said Pole; 'it's a fascinating bit of humour. Wait there.'

Mr. Goldsmith remained upon the deck, and affably offered to beguile the time of his

waiting by tossing with me for a sovereign. I declined this sportive offer.

'Look here!' said the agreeable young man. He selected two sovereigns from a little handful, and sitting down upon the deck, with his back lounging against the wall of the boat, he began to toss and catch the sovereigns with a flourishing dexterity which seemed wasted on so simple a process. 'We'll go the best of sevedteen,' he said, 'and see who'd have won if we *had* been tossig. I like to go a big long number because it prologs the agony. I call to you on the right hand, and you call to me on the left.' When he had arranged the preliminaries to his own satisfaction he entered upon his self-appointed business with gravity. He called 'eight all,' and even seemed excited. Again he spun the glittering coin, and peered into his palm to see the result. 'I should have lost,' he said. 'I always do lose. There's nothing like my luck in the world. I never have a slice of luck like

other people. Now, wod't you have a flutter?'

Still I declined, thinking of a famous phrase in the collected works of a philosopher of his own nation, and half inclined to quote it to him. 'Surely the net is spread in vain in the sight of any bird.' I repressed myself, however, and he sank into silence, and producing a miniature book from an inner pocket fell to checking entries in it with a little gold pencil, until he became absorbed enough to forget me. By and by Pole appeared, dressed for town, and he and Mr. Goldsmith, stepping ashore, took their way across the fields towards the railway station.

I was a little curious still, in spite of myself. I should as soon have thought of the magnificent and refined Mr. Delamere himself associating with this young Hebrew as of Pole, who was fastidious in the choice of his companions. If I had been disposed to criticise my friend I might have thought that

he was a little too ready and too profound in disdain, and Mr. Goldsmith was just the kind of person of whom he would be most readily and most profoundly disdainful. Yet the two had dealings together, and the fat little Jew at least was obviously unconscious of any great social or intellectual difference between them.

I was displeased to find myself clinging in fancy to this problem, the solution of which, however simple or complex it might be, was assuredly no business of mine, and I took up a book to get rid of it; but still finding myself hovering round the theme in a manner which I felt to be altogether absurd and undignified, I walked off to the village, locking up the house-boat before I started, and ordered dinner at the inn. Pole and I did our own cooking, and were getting to be expert, but a regimen of chops and steaks palled somewhat when the pleasant novelty of providing for ourselves was worn away, and on this particular afternoon I felt a distaste for solitude.

Nothing seemed very entertaining that afternoon. I lounged about the river-bank until dinner was ready, and then sat down to my meal in a room overlooking the stream, and read the day before yesterday's newspaper as I ate. Dinner over—and I made it last as long as I could to kill the time—I hung at the window watching the few craft about the stream, when I heard my friend's name mentioned loudly and distinctly.

'Mr. Pole. Mr. Walter Pole.'

A lady stood at the steps by the water-side, and near her was the man who had brought Goldsmith to the house-boat. The man answered in a murmur, pointing up stream. The lady said 'Thank you' in a somewhat harsh and metallic-sounding voice, and turning away from him looked casually up at me as I looked out of window, and so moved away. She struck me as being over-dressed, and her face was painted. She was perhaps two or three-and-thirty years of age, of a handsome and imposing presence, but

reckless and passionate to look at, and I had an instinct that she had been drinking. In the mere second for which her eyes rested on mine they were scornful and defiant; and in her manner of looking away from me there was a world of disdain.

The lady struck me as being no more a desirable acquaintance from Pole's point of view than the Jew had seemed to be—if anything a little less. The memory of her face and figure stayed with me; I might almost say it haunted me. There was a sort of imperious abandoned devilry about her which made me think that she had fallen utterly out of her own esteem, and that her worse self stood before her better self, striving to stare her down and brazen her out of her reproaches. I cannot tell how or why, but the magnificence of her dress seemed to be in contradiction with her face. I fancied her in squalor, with the great lustrous coils of her heavy hair unloosed and hanging in disorder.

She kept me in unpleasant company across

the fields as I walked back to the boat. I saw her at a distance once, drawing patterns on the turf with the point of her laced parasol, and looking downwards. From where she stood she could see the house-boat, if she were but minded to look at it; and I had so much aversion to the possibility of being recognised as one of its inmates and being questioned by her that I purposely sauntered away from it until I assured myself that she had disappeared. Then I approached it, dropped into the dingey, and pulled up stream. It was an hour before I came back again, and the shades of evening were beginning to fall. The lady was on the deck of the house-boat, trying the door, which I had locked some two or three hours earlier. It was but a step from the baked clay of the bank to the deck. I drifted by in the growing dark, and feigned to take no notice of her, though I was irresolutely inclined to accost her and to tell her that Pole was absent.

I heard her shaking and knocking with an apparent increasing anger and insistence as I drifted beyond her, and then the sounds ceased, and she seemed to have resigned her attempt to enter, or to have made up her mind that the boat was really deserted. I kept away for fully an hour after this, and then returning and finding the coast clear, entered, lit the lamp, and sat down to my usual evening's work. At this time I was resolute to select and record whatever seemed best worth noting and remembering in the progress of the day—thoughts, impressions, descriptions, scraps of all sorts. I was engaged in this way, and quite absorbed in my task, when the door was thrust suddenly and noisily open, and turning a startled look that way, I saw the lady standing before me.

She stared at me with a sort of haughty and angry surprise, as though the chamber had belonged to her and I had been an intruder.

'Where is Mr. Pole?' she asked me, curtly and disdainfully.

'He has gone to town,' I answered.

'You heard me asking for him at the inn,' she said, with the same curt disdain of words and tone; 'why did you not tell me then that he was gone to town?'

'I beg your pardon,' I answered. 'It did not occur to me.'

'It did not occur,' she said, in a voice of explanatory suavity, as if she addressed some third person. Then—'I will wait until he returns.'

She entered, closed the door behind her, and sat down. I made no objection to this, though I am afraid I showed no enthusiasm of welcome. She sat in silence, and when I made a motion to place the lamp nearer to her and to set a little heap of books beside her, so that she might occupy herself, she moved me away contemptuously. Except for an occasional tapping of the foot upon the floor, which bespoke either anger or impatience, she made no sound; and when I had offered one or two casual awkward obser-

vations and had received no more sign of heed or answer than if I had addressed a graven image, I also relapsed into silence. A half-hour of excessive discomfort—on my side, at least—went by, and then came the sound of a tuneful whistle which I knew for Pole's. My companion recognised it also, and rising to her feet stood facing the door.

A mere moment later Pole leapt on the deck, and the vessel swayed faintly. Then the door opened, and I saw Pole's face look in with its usual aspect of idle insouciance. Underlying that lazy, careless look there was always an expression of waiting courage, and I had always thought that Pole, if he were really awakened, would be an awkward enemy. His eyes blazed into swift anger as he caught sight of the waiting figure, but he resumed his usual look almost at once. He stuck his hands into his pockets and nodded at me, presenting so complete a picture of his common self that I was more than half

inclined to doubt my impression of a few seconds earlier.

'That you, Adelaide?' he said. 'I'll walk to the railway station with you. We'll talk as we go.'

She answered never a word, but followed him into the darkness.

CHAPTER VI

When Pole came back again in the course of about an hour, he began to swing his hammock and otherwise to prepare for the night. For my own part, I had to pretend to be not in the least interested by his visitors, but I knew that my manner seemed odd and constrained, and my very desire that he should notice nothing seemed at last insistent and impertinent. I arranged my own hammock, and drew the curtain which separated us for the night across the chamber, but I had only just addressed myself to sleep when he drew it back again and addressed me. The gleam of his pipe shone in the darkness, and revealed his eyes and the tip of his nose by occasional glimpses.

'Did that woman tell you anything, Denham?' he asked.

'Nothing,' I answered. 'She asked for you, and when I told her you had gone to town she said she would wait.'

'Was she here long before I came?'

'About half an hour.'

He was silent for a minute or two, but smoking furiously, as I could see through the darkness, by the alternate glow and fading of the pipe.

'I don't know why I shouldn't tell you,' he said, at the end of this pause. 'You'll hold your tongue about it.'

'If you want to tell me anything that you want kept secret it shall never be talked about.'

'Very well. That's my wife.'

I think I was too astonished to reply. He was quiet for a time, and then he laughed oddly.

'We were married four years ago. I remember tipping the pew-opener. She let off

an old joke on me : "You've tied a knot with your tongue that you can't undo with your teeth."'

He laughed again in the same odd way as before, and I made no answer. I did not see what could be said to be of service. My head whirled, and I thought of all sorts of ridiculous things, congratulations and condolences, but luckily none of them passed my lips. Pole said no more. I heard him lay his pipe down carefully, and I heard him settling himself in his hammock. Then I listened to the lap of the water on the boat and the stir and rustle of the leaves which hung above the roof, and the nibbling of a lonely rat who had his home in the well, and defied all our efforts to entrap him. I had never until then felt so dreary and unhappy in my life, and I lay awake the greater part of the night thinking of Pole and pitying him, and wondering what the history might be.

He was precisely like himself next morning, and precisely like himself for many days

afterwards, and for a long time there was no more said between us. I thought then, and still think, that he took my silence as the most friendly and acceptable thing I had to offer, and that he liked me the better for it. On his side the revelation of an unhappy secret, and on my side the knowledge of it, seemed to draw us closer. But he seemed to desire that I should treat the revelation as if I had forgotten it, and with every day it grew to be less possible to speak of it. So between us we buried it for the time.

If I have not conveyed a sufficing picture of the woman, my feeling about Pole's union with her will seem exaggerated, unless indeed the feeling itself be translated into the picture, and is seen as a reasonable part of it. I have now lived twice the years I had then known, and have seen the world of men and women far and wide, but I have never met anything to equal the hate and pride and self-disdain of her face. 'I know you hate me. Well, I hate you, and despise you, and I hate myself

and all the world.' The proud eyes, and the haggard, painted face said these things plainly, and never failed to say them in my imagination when I recalled her. A dreadful, hateful, ruined face. A woman to pity and avoid.

Naturally enough, she had not seemed so dreadful at first as she became when I knew of Pole's connection with her. We pass people in the street every day with absolutely no feeling, who would inspire us with an awful terror and aversion if they were in any way wound about our own lives, or the lives of our friends.

Then, naturally enough again, I began to regard my friend with different eyes, and with new light upon him began to see and to understand things which I had not hitherto noticed. His ordinary idle and tranquil ways deceived me no more, and I saw in him chiefly a settled determination not to be cast down. Being impelled to notice him as I was, I began to see also that his apparent ease of demeanour covered a good deal of shyness.

His lounging air gave somehow an impression of complete coolness and *savoir faire*, but this on closer knowledge of him became transparent. Perhaps in the warmth of my sympathy I exaggerated what I saw in him, but I began to think him far more sensitive, more retiring and sympathetic, than a score of people I knew who more or less laid claim to these qualities, and I came to regard him as a man rather unusually prone to suffer, though uncommonly well able to conceal his pains.

The regatta week came, the house-boat was towed up to Henley, and Mr. Goldsmith arrived with a great kit of the most amazing, glaring river costumes I ever yet beheld. Pole treated him with a remarkable coolness, and yet on more than one occasion I came upon them talking with great seriousness and an air of confidence. Their conversation always came to an immediate end with my appearance, and somehow, without knowing very precisely why, I associated Goldsmith

with Pole's unhappy union, and supposed that their talks together in some way related to it.

There was no man on the river who was quite as aquatic in his aspect as Goldsmith, but he was the most useless of cockneys in a boat. On the second day of the regatta he was making prodigious efforts to get out of the course, and was being objurgated from a score of quarters at once, when he ran full tilt into a very handsome and delicate craft, in which were seated two ladies and a gentleman, the latter very jovial to look at, but short in temper as it proved. The handsome craft was lying immediately below our house-boat, and Pole, who had cast aside his usual quiet for the moment, was roaring unheeded instructions to the fat little Jew to back water and to look where he was going, and so on. The proprietor of the endangered craft was vainly striving to get past the ladies to break the shock of the advancing boat, when crash it came, started a plank or two, and threw

the ladies and their companion into a struggling heap. The gentleman first emerged from the pile, and had a dreadful struggle with himself not to say things which should prejudice him for ever in the eyes of his companions. I knew so well the kind of relief for which his nature at that moment clamoured, that I trembled for him. But in a while he dared to give utterance to his feelings.

'Go home, sir,' he said to the wretched Goldsmith. 'You have no business here; go home, sir.'

He spoke with a very loud voice, and laid a tremendous emphasis on the aspirate in 'home.'

Goldsmith, who had bumped the back of his head on the bottom of the dingey—he had a lump as large as a hen's egg there half an hour later—murmured in confused apology.

'Go home, sir,' shouted the other; 'go home.' And not a word beyond that would

the infuriate man trust himself to utter. 'Go home, sir; go home.'

Somehow the author of this disaster scrambled aboard the house-boat, and so drew upon Pole and myself the attention of the crowd, and at the same time induced the sufferer to include us with Goldsmith in a common condemnation.

We went inside for a moment with Goldsmith, who was half-stupid from the shock, and then Pole returned to the angry man and entered into speech with him.

'I hope the boat isn't much injured,' I heard him say. 'If you'll let me know the amount of the damage I will see that it is paid.'

'Send him home, sir,' said the angry man, refusing at present to be mollified; 'send him home.'

'Sir,' said Pole in suavest tones, 'he shall be sent. I hope the ladies are not hurt.'

The ladies replied that they were not hurt at all; but looking through the window, I

was aware of one of them very ruefully regarding a pretty straw hat which was crushed out of all shape. Pole sympathised very warmly, and I heard him insinuating that really after that shock a glass of wine—he must really be permitted. He must really be allowed to insist. He came into the boat, took a bottle of champagne which had been lying in ice for luncheon, gathered some glasses together, and went out again. I in the meantime was preparing vinegar and brown paper for Goldsmith, and doctoring him as well as I could. He was dreadfully sulky, and when I was finished with him, I went outside and found Pole fraternising with the three strangers, all politeness and regret for the accident, and solicitude for the ladies. The sufferer, all things considered, turned out an extremely amiable fellow; and what between Pole's soothing and the champagne, he came back to himself. He cast some piteous glances at the boat, which was new and of an expensive make, but he said no

more until Pole, after an audible altercation with Goldsmith, brought the latter out to apologise, and to promise all reasonable compensation. But Goldsmith was unfortunate in his way of putting the thing, and the sufferer by his clumsiness was hard upon him.

'It is not a matter for apology, sir,' he said, 'or for compensation. You have no business here. You had better take the advice I gave you, and go home.'

'I've apologised,' said Goldsmith, halfway through his nose, 'and I've offered to pay; that's all one gentleman can do for adother, and if the other ain't reasonable about it, all I've got to say is he's no gentleman.'

Then there was an altercation in which I felt that I sounded the depths of shame, Mr. Goldsmith conducted himself so little to my fancy. It was ended by Pole, who bundled the Jew into the interior of the boat.

'We hired the thing from that fellow for

the season,' he explained, evidently not caring any more than I did to be identified with our companion. 'He made a point of coming up to Henley, and I gave way. His breaking your boat *was* an accident. Perhaps the fact that he's a blackguard may be accidental too.'

There was an exchange of cards between Pole and the stranger, and then the damaged boat was rowed away. Pole marched, with every appearance of tranquillity, into the presence of our guest and landlord, and began, with a quiet dogmatism which must have been painful and exasperating to Goldsmith, to express his opinion of him.

'You are really,' he said, 'a very horrid little person, and after your behaviour of to-day I won't have you about.'

'How could I help running into the man's boat?' snarled Goldsmith. The cunning, smiling, self-approving little man was all changed, and he ruffled and swelled, and grew red about the head like a turkey-cock.

'You could have helped using bad language before ladies,' said Pole.

'No I couldn't,' said Goldsmith, who was ready to contradict anything.

'That is a trifle worse than ever,' said Pole. 'The man who cannot help using bad language before ladies is a man to be avoided. I must ask you to go.'

'I won't go,' the little man almost shrieked. 'It's my boat. I'll stop.'

'If you are not gone in half an hour,' Pole responded, 'I shall drop you overboard. I have spoken.'

At that we returned to the deck, and in a while Goldsmith began to pack up his effects. He interrupted himself to come out and address us. He said it was part of the bargain he had made that he was to have a week at Henley. He had but three days, and he demanded a guinea a day for four days more. He added that he thought the request was moderate.

Pole counted out four pounds four

shillings and dropped the money in his hand. He took it with no evidence of shame, and went indoors to continue his packing. But by and by he was back again, blazing.

'Look here,' he began, 'you're taking a very high and mighty air with me, Mr. Pole, but I'll be even with you. I know a thing or two that you don't think I know, and I'll spoil your game, as sure as I'm alive. It wasn't in my line to denounce anybody, let alone a customer, but I'll spoil your game, as sure as I'm alive. Oh, you needn't stare at me! I ain't afraid of you. I haven't got to do the thing myself. I've only got to put the missis on to you. She'll jolly sharp put a stopper on you, see if she don't. You go fooling about with Miss Delamere any more——'

Pole had been lolling against the door-post, regarding the man with a look of complete indifference up to this, but here he darted at him, and before another word was spoken, and before I could intervene, Gold-

smith was splashing in the water. He came up screaming and spouting, and swam to land, and, standing on the bank, threatened Pole in a most horrible manner, stamping and spluttering with rage. All eyes were turned, and all necks were craned to see what was the matter. Pole pushed me indoors and followed, closing the door behind him, and when the Jew had screamed his fill and had gathered an eager and excited crowd, he was moved away. A man came, half an hour later, from one of the hotels, asking for his baggage.

'I think,' said Pole, observing that a considerable number of people still seemed to linger near us, and to find us interesting and curious, 'I have had enough of publicity for to-day. I shall go up to chambers. Will you come?'

I assented willingly, and we went away together. Neither he nor I made any allusion to the quarrel, but it dwelt in my mind heavily, and I was unable to forget it.

We went to a concert in the evening, but I heard little of the music, and was wondering, whether I would or no, what the Jew's sayings might mean. Later on, in my room, Pole opened his mind a little, but not much.

'I shall have some trouble over that fellow,' he said, after guarding silence for a full hour. 'He's a solicitor and money-lender, and his father did some business for my wife before we married, and seemed really to have behaved kindly to her. When we two had to go our separate ways I wanted somebody to stand between us, and make her the necessary payments, and so forth. I went to look for the old man and found the young one. He did as well as anybody. The old man is dead, and the young one has the business. Then my wife is one of their own people. I shall have to find somebody else, I suppose. I dare say you wondered why I had him down at Henley?'

I did—a little—I confessed.

'He has a curious influence with my wife. He can keep her quiet when nobody else can. I thought she might find us out at a place like Henley. I didn't want a scene. He was to have looked out for her. It's a melancholy sort of business, isn't it?' he asked, as if he were merely tired.

I thought it very melancholy indeed, and answered so.

'Well,' he said, shrugging his shoulders, 'I've made my bed, and I must lie on it. It's all in the day's work. Good-night, old chap.'

He would confess to nothing, would make no show, but I thought how heart-sore he must be, and was profoundly sorry for him, not for the last time. But whether I would have it there or no, I could not get Miss Delamere's name out of my head, and my mind strayed here and there in fruitless conjecture. But I could think no ill of Pole, and certainly I could think no ill of

the one Miss Delamere I knew. My dreams defied me, and I saw Pole leading Miss Delamere to the altar, and saw the Jew pounce out from behind one pillar of the building, whilst Pole's wife pounced out from behind another, crying out so shrilly that they awoke me.

After that I lay awake the greater part of the night, wondering if Pole had fallen in love with Miss Delamere in his unhappy loneliness, and if that were the reason of his avoidance of her.

CHAPTER VII

About three weeks after the events just related, when we had got our floating residence back into its old quarters, there came up the river, one lovely tranquil morning, a fussy and important steam-launch, with a dozen ladies and gentlemen aboard, and a bright striped awning of pink and white and blue, which shone very prettily and gaily in the sunshine. Pole and I were waiting to enter the lock when this vessel came screaming along to signal to the lock-keeper, and we were still there when she came up. She halted alongside our quieter and less imposing craft, and when the wet gates swung slowly open and we passed into the shadow and cool between the

gleaming walls, she glided slowly after us.

We were just beginning to float upwards when a female voice said, speaking above us, 'Good-morning, Mr. Pole,' and looking up I was aware of a white-haired elderly lady who was bending over the rail of the launch and smiling downwards. Pole snatched off his cap and smiled back again, and was exchanging greetings with her when no less a person than Sebastian Dolmer Jones appeared beside her, and waved a friendly hand to both of us.

'This is lucky,' said Jones, 'we are two men short. Come on board. We are going as far as Pangbourne. Leave your boat here. You can call for it on your way back. We are going to have a jolly day and leave dull care behind us.'

'Pray come, Mr. Pole,' said the elderly lady. 'We are lamentably short of gentlemen.'

Then two or three other people whom

Pole knew, but who were strange to me, joined very cordially in this invitation, and we had just confessed that we had nothing particular to do, and were not bound especially anywhere, when Mr. Delamere and his daughter, neither of whom had hitherto come within our range of vision, appeared also. Mr. Delamere blessed us, as it were, from his superior height, and said—

'Glad to see you, Pole. Glad to see you. Glad to see *you*, Denham. Glad to see you. Come on board, by all means. By all means, come on board.'

As if he waived all possible objections which somebody was going to offer to our society, and were quite resolved not to hear them spoken of. It was, of course, too late to hesitate, and so we went on board, though I did so with mixed feelings. Pole shook hands with Mr. Delamere with a rather chill politeness, I thought; but then I was looking out for that, and I dare say that nobody else

noticed it. I had not time for the moment to remark anything further. Mr. Jones took me round and told me people's names, and told people my name, in that pleasant and simple fashion which then obtained. The old fashion had at least the merit of preventing nervous young men and women, who thought they *must* be entertaining, from saying smart things to the wrong people and about the wrong people.

Then I had to give instructions to the lock-keeper about the boat, and when this was done we all steamed away together up the sunny river, and I had time to look about me, and see what manner of people I had fallen amongst. They all seemed agreeable and amiable and bent upon enjoying themselves, and, with the exception of Mr. Delamere and the lady who had first accosted Pole, the party was entirely composed of young and youngish people.

Miss Delamere was talking to Pole, and he was answering her in a manner to

dissipate any fancies of romance between them.

'You have developed a very unlooked-for characteristic, Mr. Pole,' she said, with that air of harmless impudence which we all think so charming in a beautiful girl. 'You grow retiring.'

'Grow!' answered Pole, with equal lightness and gaiety of demeanour. 'I am grown. Denham and I are hermits. We are a sort of double Diogenes. You passed our tub a quarter of a mile below the lock.'

'Is your choice of the life final?' she asked him smilingly. 'Are your friends never to see you again?'

'We have forgotten the world,' he answered, with a slight humorous exaggeration of tone, 'and supposed ourselves forgotten by it. Perhaps when nature grows unkind we may be driven back to the world we have abjured. I don't know yet how strong we are.'

'Nature at her severest did not drive you

our way in the winter time,' she said, smiling and nodding her head at him.

Pole's gaiety failed him for a mere second, and he blushed and looked guilty.

'Now, Mr. Denham,' said Miss Delamere, withdrawing her attack on Pole in what I thought a very ready and graceful way—though it was my habit by this time to think very highly of this young lady and of all she might do—'Mr. Denham has been delightfully regular. You, I trust,' addressing me directly, 'are not going to turn permanent hermit.'

I thought not, looking at the bright eyes and beautiful face. Not the presence of all the Dolmer Jones's and elderly male Delameres in the world could rob a room of its charm whilst that delightful countenance decorated it. I left these reflections unspoken, but I assured her that I had no intention of turning hermit at all—that on the whole I was rather fond of the world, and thought it an agreeable sort of place.

'When I was little,' said Miss Delamere, 'I was told that it was very stimulating to virtue to let it be plainly seen and known that people were expected to be good. You are expected to be very good to-day, Mr. Pole.'

'I will try,' he answered, 'to make the expectation stimulating. In point of fact, I will be good.'

He did in effect become exceedingly bright and gay, and was spoken of as being a great acquisition. There is always at a picnic somebody who is described as being the life and soul of the party, and Pole set all the young people chaffing and laughing so successfully, that before the day was over that title was his by common consent. Mr. Delamere's high-bred and lofty quiet would have sat a little heavily on some of us, I fancy, had it not been for his detestor's presence. Only every now and again to my mind Pole seemed to flag and to go unusually gloomy. It needed but a word to bring him back to

his air of gaiety, and he said a hundred bright things, not of the sort which are worth keeping and will sparkle in any setting, but of the smaller sort which make people laugh when they are disposed to laughter, but might seem perhaps a little poor and commonplace if they were recorded. They were Paris brilliants perhaps, but then they made no pretence of being Koh-i-noors, and in that sunlight of youth and high spirits and summer holiday they sparkled, as I remember, very brightly. This was a new side of him to me, and the sight of it set me thinking gravely once or twice how very happy and handsome and genial he might have been if that dark chapter of his life I knew of had never been written.

After luncheon there was displayed a tendency which I had remarked before, and have since observed at such gatherings—a tendency, namely, to get into couples, and to wander away from the centre. Pole and Miss Delamere were companions, and for my

own part I was attracted by haphazard to the society of a certain Miss Clara Grantley, in speaking of whom I shall have to be careful, since the lady's eye will assuredly rest upon these pages, and her introduction to this narrative is already expected. She was, then, the most charming young person of her sex whom I had yet had the pleasure of beholding. I established my own discernment by almost immediately falling in love with her, and I shall remember that sunlit river and those happy fields as long as I remember anything. She was only eighteen and I was barely half a dozen years older, so that we were both very young, and we were both certainly very shy. Shyness is less the fashion among young people than it used to be, I fancy.

I remember that at first we talked mostly about Pole, and that I spoke very highly of him. She told me that a brother of hers, then in India, had been at school with Pole, and was very fond of him. I answered that

everybody must be; and so, with Pole as a kind of conversational walking-stick, we began to get along together very nicely. It dawned upon me at moments that the young lady was very pretty, and I had the sense to think myself a lucky dog in having secured a partner in all ways so agreeable. She had blue-gray eyes and hair of a golden-yellowish hue, a beauty which has grown much more common than it used to be before the chemist came in and invented an auricomous hair-wash. I do not believe that in those ancient days that delusive compound had been invented—ladies should be told that we of the other sex are always able to distinguish art from nature in that particular—and even if it had been, my companion was one of the people who are favoured by nature with the best of all possible reasons for not using it. She had a very fair complexion and a freckle or two, which to my thinking made the fairness prettier to look at. I shall abide by the freckles, whatever editorial revision

may be attempted. I remember them distinctly.

This charming young person had a mother who was something of an invalid, and was in the country for her health. They were great friends of the Delameres; and Mrs. Delamere (who had been dead for many years) and mamma had been schoolgirls together. So now the charming young person was staying in the Delameres' house, and Miss Delamere had care of her. She did not seem very much to like Mr. Delamere, which, in its way, was a sort of bond of union between us, and she said she did not think Jones was very nice, which was indisputably another. She had some awe of Delamere, whom she regarded as being supernaturally learned and clever, but she thought he undervalued the other kinds of learning and cleverness which other people had. Jones and he seemed to be very great friends indeed, and Jones was a great deal about the house; in fact he almost lived there. Her tone seemed to express

something of a regret for this fact; at least I so construed it, and it soothed me. I should have been disappointed in a girl otherwise so charming if she had liked Jones.

We strolled about that beautiful afternoon, and I sculled her about the river, where she was at first a little timid, though she soon grew accustomed and fearless, and became interested in learning to steer. I should have been an egregious young coxcomb if I had at this time even begun to have a notion of what was really happening to me, but I took the fever naturally, and at first kindly. There never had been surely so charming a companion. There never had been such a pretty girl. And so far that was all.

Now, I myself am, if I may be forgiven for mentioning the fact, a swarthy man of a muddy complexion, and, as old experience proves, therefore all the likelier to find blue-gray eyes and yellowish hair and rosy cheeks —not peony, if you please, but rosy, the

most delicate, wholesome, rose-leaf bloom in the world—I was all the more likely, I say, to find these charms attractive and supreme. And then, of course, I admired the shy, gentle, sweet nature and the arch, timid face, and had never known anything so delightful. And whether you like to believe it or not, madame, for whose especial behoof this page is, and one or two that have preceded it are written, I had never fallen in love before. That is in any way worth speaking of.

We found in a while two others of our party on the bank, but whether they preferred solitude or were too benevolent to spoil our enjoyment, they declined our hypocritical invitation to join us, and strolled away among the trees; and, like the Ancient Mariner with the water-snakes, I blessed them unaware.

It was altogether a day to remember, but it faded as all days will. The steam-whistle sounded, and we all assembled at the launch,

and went away down stream again. I hoped with all my heart all the time that Miss Delamere would give me an invitation, and I was, I am afraid, very ingratiatory with her. She gladdened me by doing what I wanted very kindly and graciously. So pretty a girl, and so charming a companion! I wanted to see as much of that beauty as I could, and to have more of that charming companionship.

At the lock where we had met them all we took leave of them. A mile or two farther down stream they would betake themselves to the rail, and so back to town and dinner. Pole and I, perched on the lock gate, waved farewell with our caps so long as we could see the flutter of the departing handkerchiefs. There had been a jolly affectation of heart-break between Pole and the old lady at losing one another, and it was because of this that the signals of good-bye were thus prolonged.

Whilst we were still waving and smiling

we turned to look at each other, and waved and smiled no more. We both went mighty solemn with a ludicrous suddenness. When we looked at each other next we laughed, but oh! we were serious afterwards. We pulled down to our aquatic residence, and went gloomily about our business of cooking and eating. The pleasant day was over.

We lit our pipes and sat in the twilight, whilst the land grew duskier and duskier, and the stars grew brighter and brighter. And one of us was filled with I don't know how many hopes and projects and fancies. There was the magic cauldron which Youth, Health, Hope, and Co. will lend to anybody, and all the projects and fancies bubbling in it, and I watching for the projection, and the consequent wonderful wild-fowl. And here was the other of us looking at the magic cauldron cracked and dry, and beyond refilling or mending. Strange how near we can be to one another, and how far away!

CHAPTER VIII

A DAY or two later, when I told Pole that I had received an invitation to Cromwell Terrace, he made no answer beyond that which might be conveyed in an enigmatical grunt. But a week further on, when I went up to chambers, he accompanied me, and in the evening, somewhere about ten o'clock, just as I was about to set off, he turned up, dressed, and announced that he was going with me. I was very glad to have him, and I supposed that, after the day on the launch, he had made up his mind that Delamere's society was bearable, and had effected his peace with Delamere's daughter.

The house was crowded, and there was the greatest difficulty in getting about.

There had been a highly select and distinguished dinner-party, and now there was such a cram as, in my limited experience, I had not seen. The stairs were full, the conservatory half-way up was full, the landings were full, and the rooms were only a thought less crowded. Pretty Miss Grantley was talking to a bald-headed old gentleman in the very last corner I came to, and she gave me a blush and a smile of recognition when she caught sight of me. The corner was defended—barricaded, as it were—by two big china jars, of the shape of a cask, and a capacity, as I should judge, of some twelve gallons. One of these made a sufficiently comfortable seat; and when the old gentleman (who may have had the surprising good sense to think that a couple of young people who greeted each other blushing and smiling might be as happy without him as with him)—when the old gentleman had withdrawn through a momentary crack in the crowd, I took the seat he had vacated,

and entered into talk about the water party of a little while ago, and other matters of equal interest and moment.

This, of course, was all very delightful, but was not allowed to last. I felt a hand laid upon my shoulder, and looking up saw the venerable Dr. Fish beside me beaming through his gold-rimmed glasses. He shuffled into our corner, and with no doubt the most benevolent intentions, he stayed there and talked until Miss Grantley slipped away. Then I, not daring to follow, and being held by this nice old man by the lappel of the coat whilst I thought unutterable things of him, sat there in silent torture for a time and answered, I fear, very much at random. But by and by he interested me.

'I see Pole here again,' he said. 'I am glad to see him here. You will meet people here, Denham, who will improve your mind. Pole is looking very well. You and he are great companions, I believe?'

'Oh yes,' I answered, 'we are great friends.'

'I am very glad of that,' he went on. 'Of course no honest man will choose his friends because they are rich and influential; but wealth and influence are valuable things, and rightly used, you know, Denham, rightly used——'

He rubbed his hands and looked seriously and sagely at me.

I had not known that Pole's wealth, or his influence either, was at all beyond the common, and I said as much; but the Doctor broke in eagerly.

'My dear young sir, don't you know that there is but a single life between him and the title? You didn't know? Dear me! It's quite a vast fortune—really an exceptional thing! You didn't know that? Dear me! How reticent your friend must be!'

I admitted that my friend was reticent; but I urged that human life was a somewhat uncertain thing to build calculations upon,

and that Pole was about the last man I knew to speculate upon it.

'Oh dear, dear no,' said Doctor Fish, shaking his head with a mournful look; 'there is no such extreme element of uncertainty as you imagine, Mr. Denham. The remaining life is dreadfully frail; the poor fellow is hardly expected to last a year—they're moving him to the Riviera now, I believe.'

This was news certainly; but I was not in the least degree surprised that Pole had said nothing of it. I thought it indeed most natural in him to be silent.

It helped to make him more of a personage in my eyes, but not as I fancy the good old Doctor meant it to do. It seemed certainly to make his position the more pitiable, though this was assuredly to take a most unjust and foolish view of things, for to be wealthy and to hold a place of high consideration in the world are at least among the aids to happiness. But the promise of wealth and rank

seemed to emphasise his trouble. The smile of fortune's sunshine did but throw the shade into more sombre relief. I did not ask whether it would do so for him; it did it for me in my conception of him.

I learned that the owner of the life which stood between Pole and the title was a cousin Reginald of his, who had been always reckoned feeble. This Reginald's father had been dead but a few months. He was a stalwart man of middle age, and when he came to his end by an accident in the hunting-field had been upon the eve of a second marriage. Three years earlier, the Doctor told me, no man would have given a shilling for Pole's chance, but four sound lives had fallen unexpectedly away, and now there was nobody left but this cousin, who had been bred as a stranger to him.

When I had time to think of it, I liked Pole the better for not having spoken to me of this matter. It argued a certain delicacy in him to be silent. I knew, and I still

know, a great many men who would have been loud about it, and would have basked in their glories beforehand, whose feet would have itched for the feeble man's shoes.

The Doctor found me out later that evening and told me that he had heard news of Reginald Pole. There was little hope for him. The doctors had decided that he should go southwards, but by very easy stages, and the hand of death, so the old gentleman said impressively, seemed on the poor boy already.

'Delamere told me of it,' said Dr. Fish. He had spoken of the poor lad who had come so near to high fortune and was now slipping away from it into an early grave with becoming solemnity; but here, at the mention of Delamere, he began to twinkle. 'Our host,' he said, 'will be glad to see Pole back again now, I fancy. I hardly know how it came about; but I fancy they took a dislike to each other. But Delamere won't throw away a chance like that. Of course

Delamere's a very high-minded man and so forth, and has a very lofty idea of life, but I suppose he has no objection to seeing Miss Delamere well settled. He is distinctly more amiable to Pole than he used to be. That is how the world goes, my young friend. Do well, thrive, get on in the world, and you will find people agreeable to you.'

He went on, eminently well satisfied with himself, and I listened in a sort of stupor. That awful marriage of Pole's was a secret. Nobody knew of it who knew him well.

'I am getting elderly,' said the babbling and indiscreet divine, who was certainly old enough to have known better than to take so close an interest as he did in other people's affairs, I thought. 'I am elderly, but I feel an interest in youth. I am looking on at a good many things with a great deal of pleasure. Do me the credit to remember this enigmatical utterance in a year or two's time, Denham, and ask me what I meant by it.'

'I think I know what you mean, sir,' I returned.

'Do you?' he asked, nodding his benevolent bald head and smiling. 'Ah! you're a friend of his. Exactly.'

'I think you are altogether wrong, sir,' I said; 'I am sure you are altogether wrong. Pray do not spread any idea of that kind.'

'Pooh, pooh!' responded the Doctor. 'I have known them both for years. I have seen it growing on both sides.'

I spoke before I knew it, and the Doctor stared at me.

'I hope not; oh, I hope not!'

'Dear me,' he said, in some confusion. 'Let us change the theme.' He took me very kindly and confidentially by the arm, and gave his grip a little friendly pressure. 'I beg your pardon, my boy, I beg your pardon. I am a foolish, indiscreet old fellow. There, there, let us say no more; let us say no more.'

I thought it best to leave him to any fancy

he might form. The question was dangerous. If he chose to think that I was in love with Miss Delamere, it mattered little; and since he was so ready to leap at conclusions, it was likely that his suspicions about Pole to the same effect were as well founded as they were of me. I am inclined to think—if I may take advantage of the liberty this narrative affords me—that I was rather an unusual young man in some respects, and that I took rather unusually serious views of things. But the idea of Pole and Miss Delamere really growing to care for each other, with that insuperable barrier between them, was terrible.

There was never the faintest little doubt of Pole's honour in my mind. If there had been a reasonable ground for thinking that Miss Delamere had had a fancy concerning him, such as an innocent girl might not have about a man who was already married, I believed that he would have cut his hand off, or burned it in the fire, rather than en-

courage it to her damage. I had so lofty a belief in his honour, and made him so much of a hero in my mind, that any thought of carelessness in this regard in him was outside my conjectures. And as for mere coxcombry, I was a very much smaller creature than Pole, and even I despised it. What was he likely to feel about it?

Now if anybody thinks that the pressure of these reflections kept me for more than ten minutes at the outside from seeking anew the charming society of Miss Clara Grantley, he gives me credit for an unselfishness of friendship to which I lay no claim. Pole's affairs interested me very deeply, and I was growing more and more attached to him, but I was not quite shut out from the contemplation of my own affairs.

The crowd was not so dense as it had been, and I was able to make my way about the rooms without so much of diplomatic effort as I had been compelled to exert earlier in the evening. As I moved about,

looking for Miss Grantley, I saw Pole in conversation with our hostess. Miss Delamere summoned me by a smile and a wave of her fan, and I joined them for a few minutes. There was nothing very noticeable in their talk, and certainly nothing in their bearing towards each other which would indicate more than the merest amiable acquaintanceship.

I succeeded in finding Miss Grantley—there is a pleasure in using that obsolete form—and I fell more pronouncedly and decidedly in love with every minute spent in her society. It was all pleasant, all charming as yet, and I had not the slightest intention to struggle against the influence which was stealing over me. Time came when I got into a state of mind no less than dreadful, and could not eat my meals.

Pole and I walked home together. We started in starlight, but before we got home the sky was light above us, and its ethereal blue was lined with beautiful faint streaks of

rose. We talked a great deal as we walked, and one thing that Pole said I recalled many and many a time afterwards.

'The best way with danger is to treat it as if you did not believe in it.'

'If a man aimed a pistol at your head, you'd dodge, wouldn't you?' I asked him; 'or strike up the weapon, or behave in some way as if you believed in the danger?'

'Exactly,' he said; 'there is no saying so wise that you can't make it look foolish by a question of that sort. But I'm not talking of pistols, though even there you may come to grief if you believe too much in danger. Come along, my Denham. Shoulders square. Head well up. March! And your blood-curdling fever is flown ten miles away.'

He clapped me on the shoulder, and we turned into the courtyard together at that instant.

'All the same,' I said, 'it isn't good counsel for everybody. There are some

whose nerves might fail at the pinch, and for them it might be safest to treat danger as if they believed in it very earnestly. Spare the weaker vessel. Don't tow her into action too desperately.'

He turned to look at me as if he sought to read some special meaning in my words, and knowing that his eyes were upon me I felt confused. I had not meant it so, but remembering Dr. Fish's talk, it flashed upon me that Pole might accept my chance simile as an impertinent warning. The more I blushed the more he looked at me, and the more he looked the more confused I felt.

'What did you mean by that?' he asked.

'Nothing!' I said; 'absolutely nothing when I said it. But you seemed to find a meaning in it.'

'And so you find a meaning in it, too, eh?'

I made some gesture with my hands to

signify that the thing was not worth thinking of, and stammered something to that effect.

'Come inside,' he said; 'let us have a talk about this.'

CHAPTER IX

I WENT upstairs to Pole's chamber feeling guilty and ashamed, though I was altogether innocent. He lit the gas — for the dawn without had not yet found its way into his chambers — took off his overcoat, chose a cigar, and seated himself, all with quiet deliberation, and then spoke.

'My finding a meaning seemed to help you to find a meaning. That is—if I found one. Let us have it out, John.'

It was by no means easy to have it out.

'My dear Pole,' I said, 'I meant nothing whatever beyond the plain sense of the words I used.'

'Quite so,' he answered. 'You won't think so ill of me as to fancy I'm angry be-

cause you have your own thoughts about me. But I want to know what they are.'

'Well,' I told him, after a moment's uneasy thinking, 'the best thing for you to do will be to ask me exactly what you want to know, and I will answer you quite honestly.'

'You asked me—innocently and as a mere figure of speech—not to tow the weaker vessel into danger. Then, on my looking at you, you identified the weaker vessel so clearly that you seemed to yourself to have been guilty of an impertinence.'

'That is exactly what happened.' I was grateful to him for translating me so perfectly.

'Have you yourself noticed anything that would lead you to suppose that I was towing anybody into danger?'

There was a slight flush upon his face, and I could see that it was difficult for him to ask the question.

'I have noticed nothing that would lead me to that opinion,' I answered.

'Then the idea has been put into your head by somebody else?'

'Yes.'

'May I ask who the somebody is?'

'I would rather not say. It was said in perfect friendship, and in something very like congratulation.'

'And you believed it?' he asked.

'No. I can't say I believed it. I had seen nothing to justify me in believing it.'

'I suppose it was Fish who spoke to you of it? Never mind. Don't answer if you don't care to. He is not the wisest of mankind, but he is a very good old foolish sort of fellow, and loves to chatter. You and I are getting to be very close friends, and I can say things to you that I can't say to anybody else. I left off visiting Delamere's house not in the least degree because I disliked the man, though I do dislike him very heartily, but because I thought I was getting into danger. I went back again because, after a good deal of thinking about it, I

came to the conclusion that I was not likely to get into danger. There is the whole story.'

There was one side of the story, I thought, but I said nothing. A man would have to come to something of an extremity in coxcombry before he would hide himself from the society of women he cared for lest they should fall hopelessly in love with him. Pole was as little likely to be affected in that way as anybody I could call to mind, and as for the old doctor, with his statement that he had seen affection growing on both sides, I declined to value him at all. I had seen Miss Delamere and Pole together twice, had noticed pretty closely, and was quite sure that she at least was heart-whole. I had been determined to be sure of it, but could really find nothing in the world to contradict my surety.

'I dare say,' Pole went on after a pause, 'that you are still in the land of romance, John. I left it some time ago. I was kicked

out of it, and am in no hurry to pass its borders again. Perhaps I might like to go back—to speak plain truth—if there were any chance of doing it. But the fox was wise after all, and when the grapes are out of reach, one can't do better than think them sour. When you have been flung downstairs and have had the door slammed behind you, it's sensible to believe that you don't want the *entrée* to the establishment.'

The dawn was broadening now, and the gas-lamp had taken a sickly tinge. He rose and turned out the light, and threw the window open and leaned out. A solitary footstep which had sounded dimly until then struck sharply on the ear. A key tapped smartly upon the iron bars of the gate which separated the court from the inn, and I heard the door of the porter's box open, and the porter's yawn. I got up and stood by Pole's side, and looked down into the courtyard. A little old gentleman in black was standing

at the gate, and the porter was in the act of unlocking it. The gate swung open, and the little old gentleman looked up casually as he started to pass through. He paused with a startled air and spoke.

'May I step up to your rooms for a moment, Mr. Pole?'

'Certainly, sir,' Pole answered, and the old gentleman entered briskly at the open door below. Pole threw open his own door to receive him, and he came briskly up the stairs.

'I had certainly not expected to find you awake at such an hour,' he said, 'but I looked up at your chambers in passing because you were in my mind. I have just come from the death-bed of your poor cousin Reginald.'

'His death-bed?' Pole asked, in a voice which sounded awe-struck.

'His death-bed,' the old gentleman answered. 'Lord Worborough and other relatives were already in town, intending to

see him off this morning to the Riviera. He was seized with a terrible fit of coughing, and broke a blood-vessel at two o'clock yesterday afternoon. Everything was done that could be done, but he died half an hour ago.'

Pole looked round at me very seriously, and then looked back to his visitor, but said nothing.

'I do not know if I am personally known to you, Mr. Pole?' the visitor went on interrogatively. Pole shook his head. 'Allow me to offer you my card. I am Lord Worborough's solicitor.' Pole took the card, and, having glanced at it, laid it quietly upon the table. 'I was charged to carry to you the melancholy intelligence, and to express to you his lordship's desire to meet you at your earliest convenience. I think,' he said hesitatingly, 'that you are not as yet known to each other?'

'I have never met Lord Worborough,' Pole answered. His voice and face were still

very solemn, and though he was not in any way shaken by the tidings, it was evident that they moved him deeply.

'His lordship will himself write to you to-morrow, and you will of course attend the funeral.'

'Of course, Mr. Fairfield,' said Pole, again glancing at the card beside him.

'I would not have intruded at this hour,' said the solicitor, 'but for the accident of seeing you at the window. I do not think I have anything more to say at present, but I will ask you for an interview to-morrow. At what hour may I call?'

Pole gave him an appointment at noon, the two then shook hands, and Mr. Fairfield, with a slight bow to me, took his leave and went briskly down the stairs. My friend and I sat down facing each other, and for a while neither of us spoke. Pole was the first to break silence.

'This is a strange thing to have happened,' he said. 'I hardly knew the poor

fellow, and his dying—if I should live a year or two longer—makes me rich, I don't know how rich, and gives me a title. Poor fellow!' He pulled thoughtfully at his cigar and went on talking. 'I used to have dreams when I was a boy of being great and rich. I had a sort of fanciful notion that I should meet somebody one day who would tell me that I had been reared for my own good under false pretences, and that I was Duke or Prince of something somewhere. I was to have passed my probation and have come out triumphant, and then the truth was to come as my reward.' He got up and threw the cigar into the courtyard, and then closed the window. Then he fell to walking up and down with his hands in his pockets. 'I've passed my probation and come out a failure, and here's the announcement. Poor Reggy! I'd rather he'd have lived. I feel as if fate were having a satiric grin at me. "Here you are, my boy. You've thrown away all the chances you had to

start with, and now here's the biggest prize in the basket for you. There are thousands who'd jump at it, and it's no good to you. Take it!"'

'You don't deserve that you should say these things of yourself or think them,' I replied. 'You are not answerable for your troubles.'

'I don't know,' he resumed, still walking up and down. 'I believe I knew as well at the time as I know it now that I was marrying a woman who could make no man happy. There's a kind of sane madness, Denham, which some men suffer from. I knew I wasn't going to be happy. I more than guessed that I was going to wreck myself. I didn't even particularly care for her, but I felt myself bound in honour, and I married her. Well, it's of no use to talk, and I know that also. I haven't bored anybody else with it. You're the only man I ever opened my lips to.'

He would not say—of course he would

not say—what this meant, but I knew it. I had begun to think of late that amidst the crowd of his acquaintance he counted a single friend, and that I was the man. I knew I loved him, but in those days I thought disparagingly of myself. That early modesty has developed (as it often does) into rather more than an average certainty of personal merit. As a matter of fact, it arose from my fear lest I might think as highly of myself as I somehow thought I ought to do. But I was uncertain of my own deserts, and thought his friendship a high honour, as any man might have done. As honest, valiant, and stalwart a heart as ever beat, I know he had.

We said good-night to each other after this with no renewal of our earlier conversation, and I went down to my rooms, and so to bed. He was closeted with the lawyer for an hour or two, I learned afterwards, and in the evening he went by appointment to see Lord Worborough. I myself made the elderly

peer's acquaintance a week later, after Reginald Pole's funeral. He called at Warwick Court when I happened to be in Pole's rooms —a bent, courteous, mild old man, with an affectionate, sad smile. I was introduced to him, and was received with an unexpected cordiality.

'Mr. Pole has spoken to me of you, Mr. Denham,' he said. 'I am very pleased to meet you. You would seem to be great friends, you two young gentlemen. I do not find that I make many friends nowadays, and I have outlived most of the old ones.'

He watched Pole rather closely, as I noticed, and wore, to my mind, an air of criticism. It was natural that he should desire to know what manner of man was coming after him, though it was out of his power to alter the succession.

'I came here, Walter, on purpose to ask you to come down into the country and stay with me a while,' he said, looking from one to the other of us. 'I want your friend to come

also. One judges a man by the company he keeps. It would be a shame to ask a pair of young fellows out into the country at this time of year under ordinary circumstances, but you see, Walter, you can naturally go nowhere and do nothing for a time, and it will be well that we should know each other. You will come, Mr. Denham? When do you think, Walter, that you and your friend can be ready?'

For my own part, I was a good deal taken aback by this unexpected invitation, but I accepted it, and we arranged that all three of us should go down to Worborough Court next day. The old lord stayed and talked for an hour or two. He was bookish in an old-fashioned way. He had read no theology newer than Paley, no philosophy later than Locke, no fiction since Sir Walter's, and no verse since Byron's. All the new people were mere names to him, and he did not care to make their acquaintance; but he was pleased to find that we knew his favourites

as well as he did, a little better, perhaps, with our fresher memories, and he told us simply that he was glad to find that we were not trivial-minded.

'Books are a great resource,' he said, with his mild smile. 'I don't read much now, but I find a pleasure in remembering. Something put Commodore Trunnion into my head as I drove down here, and I laughed. I hardly knew poor Reginald,' he added suddenly with an almost alarmed air of apology and explanation. 'He was so confirmed an invalid.'

When he had gone away, Pole and I set to work to pack in readiness for the morrow's journey, and next day we met the old lord at Paddington at the appointed hour, and went down into Devonshire. A carriage awaited us, and a brake for our baggage, and leaving the latter to follow us, we were bowled away through a wide road with beautiful overhanging hedges until the lodge gates were thrown open to us and we swept into a splendid avenue of forest trees.

'There is the first glimpse of the house,' said Lord Worborough, laying one hand upon his successor's arm, and pointing with the other, with a long withered white finger extended, the delicate old hand trembling. 'It is a very noble old place, and I hope you will be happy there when your time comes.'

There was something touching, to my mind, in this informal handing over, as it were, of the ancestral place to the young fellow who until lately had been so complete a stranger.

Pole looked at the house, and Lord Worborough, with his gold-rimmed pince-nez balanced on his nose, looked at Pole with that air of watchful regard I had noticed the day before.

'Yes,' said the heir-apparent, 'it is a noble old place.' He had been unusually thoughtful and quiet during the whole journey, and now there was a settled shadow upon him.

I saw, as we came nearer, that it was indeed a noble old place. It had a westward

aspect, and all its long lines of windows shone like burnished gold in the light of the declining sun, gleaming the brighter by contrast with their sombre setting of purplish brown tone. Pole sighed as he stepped from the carriage.

'I shall leave you now,' said our host as he entered the hall. He drew out his watch and consulted it. 'Forty-five minutes to dinner. Ample time.'

We were shown to rooms which were in communication with each other, and when the servants had brought up our luggage, and everything was laid out in readiness, we were left alone. Pole marched through the open doors of the two intervening dressing-rooms into my bed-chamber, and there, with his head resting against the wall and his hands in his pockets, stood silent for a minute or two.

'I suppose,' he said then, 'that if I should live long enough for it to come to that, Lady Worborough will have a right to come here.'

CHAPTER X

WHENEVER I found time to think of it, I used to be astonished at my own position whilst I stayed at Worborough Court. I had three hundred a year of my own, came of a family of no distinction, plain yeomen for half a dozen generations, and had as much hope of forming aristocratic associations as I had of being suddenly translated to the moon, and almost as much desire for the one as for the other. But the differences in the life were so slight and trivial that I was reconciled to my new place insensibly and at once. To ride in a carriage instead of a dog-cart or a cab—to have a man behind one's chair at dinner every evening instead of having him there on special occasions only—to have another man

to fold, and lay out, and brush one's clothes, instead of performing those small offices with one's own hands, were the main changes, and were easily to be borne with. Lord Worborough was not only kind, but companionable, and very like any other amiable, cultivated, and good old gentleman. I think I had vaguely expected everything to be very different from my old experiences; I know I found everything very much the same as it had always been.

Lord Worborough and Pole were a good deal together. The heir-apparent was being familiarised with the possessions which would one day be his own. His lordship had always kept his affairs for the main part in his own hands, and he and Pole spent hours in going over business papers together. At such times I was thrown upon my own resources, and since in my boyhood riding had been my greatest joy, and I had not been able to afford a horse in London, I took advantage of the chances offered me,

and spent most of my spare hours in the saddle.

I was riding one tranquil afternoon towards the village, thinking of a certain day at Pangbourne for the most part, and recalling with great clearness all that had been said and done, and how somebody had looked at every turn of head and hand, when I saw, far away across the fields, the crawling line of white steam which betrayed the progress of the afternoon down train. From the distance at which I saw it, it looked like an emblem of peace and quiet, and seemed to travel very slowly, but by and by rounding a great curve it came charging down towards me with increasing swiftness and a growing roar. My horse showed so decided a trepidation at the advancing monster that I turned him into a by-lane out of sight of it, and did not return to the road I had been travelling until the train had paused at the station, and the whistle had announced its departure. Then I went on towards the station. I saw without any

special interest the little handful of country people dispersing from the station door, and a gentleman farmer of the neighbourhood climb into a dog-cart which had been in waiting for him and drive away. The moving of the dog-cart revealed three people, a man and woman, the woman very fashionably attired, and a railway porter whose hand was pointing straight down the road by which I was approaching the group. In a minute or so I came near enough to see them clearly, and in a sort of horror I recognised the lady I had seen aboard the house-boat. Her companion was the little Jew solicitor, Goldsmith.

For a moment I was completely shaken out of my self-possession, and could think of nothing. My horse bore me on towards them, and I saw that I was recognised. I have no doubt my face displayed my sensations quite plainly, for Mr. Goldsmith looked up at me with a leer of self-approval, and wagged his head in what I felt to be a triumphing derision. His companion, who carried herself

with the old harsh air of self-disdain, and disdain of everything, stared me scornfully in the face. I was quite certain that their purpose here was to annoy Pole, and when they had passed me but a little way I wheeled round and overtook them.

'You'd better carry the good news ahead of us, Bister Denham,' said the little Jew. 'We're going to make a little call at Worborough Court.'

'I shall have great pleasure,' I responded as drily as I could. He laughed jeeringly, and I rode on with but a single glance at the bitter face beside him. Once out of sight and hearing, I put my horse from a trot into a gallop, and reached the Court a good half-hour before they could well be expected. I asked for Pole, and learned that he was closeted with Lord Worborough. The horse I had ridden was soft with want of exercise, and was in a lather of foam with his gallop of two and a half miles, and my own air was doubtless a good deal flurried, for the man

whom I questioned looked oddly at me as if he suspected that something was amiss. For the moment I was altogether nonplussed. It would look odd to disturb Pole by sending for him, and Lord Worborough would probably think it an impertinence. Then it struck me that I could give the man at the lodge instructions to detain the visitors there, and permit them to do no more than send their business to the house, leaving it at Pole's option to do what he chose with them afterwards. Luckily, whilst I was hurriedly turning this suggestion up and down in my mind, I heard a step upon the great staircase leading to the hall, and there was Pole himself, lounging down with his hands in his pockets as usual, and his lithe and active figure swaying into the idlest postures.

'Here is Mr. Pole, sir,' said the servant, and withdrew.

'Hillo!' said Pole. 'Anything the matter? You look scared.' I told him my news, and looking before him, with eyes half-closed and

lips drawn inward, he nodded twice or thrice. 'We'll go and meet them,' he said then, sliding an arm through mine, and taking a hat from the stand as we went by.

We walked in silence down the long avenue, passed the gates, and came upon the dusty road in silence. I looked at my companion pretty often, and if I had not known his real reasons for disturbance I should never have guessed them from his face. His arm gave a little sudden twitch as we turned a corner of the road.

'Here they are,' he said. I had looked up already and had seen them a hundred yards away. They walked on leisurely to meet us, and I could see that Goldsmith was disturbed by the thought of the coming interview. He stared about him with an uneasy pretence of not having seen us, flourished his handkerchief, cocked his hat, pulled out his watch, and drew a glove off and on. When he could no longer evade the knowledge of us he fell ever so little behind his companion,

who walked on steadily with an unchanging look until we halted within a yard of each other.

'Well,' said Pole. I could feel his hand trembling slightly, with a strong quick tremor, but his face and voice were altogether commonplace and indifferent. 'What does this mean?'

'I am spending a day or two in the country,' she answered mockingly. 'I wanted to exchange congratulations with you. Do you think the old man will last long?'

'I have been expecting this visit,' Pole returned, with an air of everyday. 'I want you to understand that I shan't allow another.'

'Indeed!' she asked with a cold sneer, 'and how do you propose to exercise your authority?'

'Well,' he said, drawing his arm from mine, and tilting his hat over his eyebrows, 'I hold the purse strings, and until you promise to leave me absolutely unmolested, I shall pay no more.'

'I have taken a house down here,' she answered, 'and I am going to live in it.'

'Very well,' said Pole, throwing his head back, and looking at her from under the brim of his hat. 'We understand each other. We needn't waste words about it. You will do as you please, and I shall use the only power I have.'

'We will see about the power you have,' said his wife. 'At the first delay of a day I shall instruct Mr. Goldsmith to sue for maintenance.'

'That's what we shall do,' said Mr. Goldsmith, still looking behind her shoulder. 'We shall sue for maintenance.'

'You threatened that before,' Pole answered, 'and I give you the answer I gave then. The moment you move in that way I shall go abroad. As for the property here I never coveted it, or expected it, and I can do without it. I can make it over by deed of gift to the next heir. I shan't pay a penny until you have ceased to annoy me.

It's the only power I have, and I shall use it.'

I could see by her eyes that there was no mischief she would not have done him if she had had the power.

'You have a third of my income now,' he went on, and I could see that his steadfast refusal to be angry or shaken was beginning to exasperate her horribly. 'In due time, if we should both live, and I should be unmolested, your allowance will be increased, to what extent I cannot tell at present, but considerably. You must choose for yourself between a comfortable provision for life and nothing at all. Good-day, Adelaide.'

He turned to go, but she sprang forward and intercepted him.

'You want war?' she said, with something of a stagy air and accent, but with an obviously genuine passion. 'You shall have it, then.'

'No,' he answered wearily and quietly. 'I want peace, and I mean to have it.' He

made a movement to walk round her, but she intercepted him again. He lit a cigarette and sat down upon the turfy bank by the roadside, with his feet apart and his hands clasped between his knees.

'I will have my rights,' she said, 'and I will make your life a burden to you.'

He looked up at her and responded with a dry simplicity, answering her last words only.

'I know you will.'

'I suppose you fancy,' she went on, with a strange and dreadful distortion of the face, 'that I know nothing of your doings. I know everything. I know why you go to Cromwell Terrace. I know why you stopped away. I know how much you wish me dead, and how you hate the sight of me. Do you think I care whether you hate me or not? Not I! Why should I?'

I drew Goldsmith a little aside, and ventured to ask him if he thought any good purpose was being served by the prolonga-

tion of this scene. I pointed out that it could only lead to an exasperation of feeling on both sides, and begged him to use his influence in getting his client away. He grinned unamiably and shrugged his fat shoulders.

'If Bister Pole doesn't like it,' he said, 'Bister Pole's got himself to thank for it, and nobody else.'

'As to that,' I answered, trying to be as diplomatic as I could, 'I am not in a position to form an opinion. But if you have your client's interest at heart, Mr. Goldsmith, I am sure you will persuade her to go away. I understand that Mrs. Pole has no means of her own, and if her husband should be so far irritated as to fulfil his threat, your own hopes of payment might be seriously affected.'

'I ain't afraid,' said Mr. Goldsmith. 'We can come on the estate. It's a legal claim, ain't it? Very well, then. What's the use of talking? If you want a man's fredly services you shouldn't chuck him in the river.'

'I want you both to understand,' Pole

broke in here, rising to his feet. His wife was still talking with a slow, bitter intensity, but she stopped at the sound of his voice and listened, looking from her husband's face to Goldsmith's and back again. 'You can make a public scandal of the thing, of course. You can drive me out of England, and make it impossible for me to return, but you can't get money from a man who is determined at all costs not to pay it. Now I am determined at all costs not to pay it—please understand that quite clearly, and once for all—unless I have quiet secured to me. On the first return of annoyance I shall go away, and leave you to your own devices.'

His face was very pale and his eyes glittered, but he spoke with a steady voice, and it was plain to see that he produced an effect on both of them. Goldsmith looked uneasily at his client, and she, with her handsome, dreadful face as white as Pole's, looked back at him, her chin raised, and her pencilled eyelids drooping, till the eyes shone through

a mere slit. I could not help thinking that there was a something posed and studied in her look and attitude, and in my own mind I pictured her as rehearsing this and similar scenes with a hungry relish for the excitement of quarrel.

'Now, Goldsmith,' Pole went on, 'you know your client. If you advise her to her present course, you must take the consequences—you can guess what they will be.'

Mr. Goldsmith showed signs of faltering. His client opened her eyes in a studied disdain and amazement, and, turning her head aside from him slowly, kept her glance fixed upon his face for a while and then withdrew it with a practised scorn.

'It's no use looking at me like that,' said Mr. Goldsmith fretfully. 'Of course I'm devoted to your interests, Mrs. Pole. I want to make the best of things for you; but it's no use cutting your nose off to spite your face. Now, is it?'

'Come, Denham,' said Pole, taking me by

the arm and moving away. This time his wife made no attempt to stay him, and the last I saw of the pair we left behind was that the little Jew was standing bare-headed and proffering his arm, whilst his client turned disdainfully away from him and stood stock still in the middle of the dusty road.

We walked in silence for some two or three hundred yards, and then Pole spoke.

'If they drive me to it I will keep my word. I dare say you thought that I was harsh. I don't care much what people think, as a general rule—perhaps I care too little—and if I justify myself to you you must take it as a compliment.'

I knew very well he was not thinking flippantly, however he might speak.

'I have suffered enough already, and I can't afford to have this misery hanging over me, threatening to come down at any moment. I must use the only power I have.'

I hastened to assure him that I did not see what other course lay open to him. In

his new position at least, whatever it had been in his old one, it was impossible, or almost impossible, to hide his whereabouts. I thought he had an absolute right to offer the bargain he had set before his wife, and that if she would not accept it he was clear of responsibility for her action.

'I am glad you think so,' he answered. 'It helps me to think so. Let us say no more about it.'

But the new hint of Pole's interest in Miss Delamere disturbed me, and the more I thought about it the less assured I felt, and the more grieved and anxious. I felt my own thoughts intrusive and impatient, but I could not banish them.

CHAPTER XI

THE *Morning Post* had announced the fact of the arrival of Mr. Pole and Mr. John Denham at Worborough Court, and after a space of some six weeks, during which nothing of importance to my history happened beyond the scenes already indicated, it announced the departure for London of the same distinguished pair. We went back to town and resumed our old quarters and our old ways. Before we left, Lord Worborough had taken the warmest sort of liking to Pole, and had, it appeared, been anxious to press an allowance upon him, and to induce him to take up a residence more in accord with his prospects and the social position they imposed upon him. But Pole protested that he

had as much as he wanted, and preferred for the present to remain in his old quarters, and so, to my great satisfaction, we went back to an unchanged life.

If my friend had been situated like most young men of his age, had been free to carve out his own career and dispose of his own destiny, I am sure that I should have been able to rejoice in the fortune which had befallen him with my whole heart. But having such solid ground for thinking poorly of his high fortune on one side, I allowed myself to think poorly of it on another. My thoughts and feelings here were purely selfish, as I am quite willing to admit. My own means gave me no right to mix on terms of equality with people of such exceptional wealth as would at one time or another come into my friend's possession. I did not altogether like the idea of his having that enormous income and that imposing title, and I felt as if these things forced us apart already. But the difference —if difference there was—was wholly on my

side. Pole showed not the slightest sign of being touched by it.

It rained one evening pretty heavily, and I had business abroad. The days were beginning to draw in, and it was dusk in the court when I got to the open doorway of the house and stood there unfolding my umbrella. The lamps were lit, and gleamed rawly in the faint light. There was something noticeably dismal in the chill mingling of gaslight with what remained of daylight, and the whining wind, which wrinkled the puddles on the stone pavement, and the relentless plashing rain intensified the feeling. I was conscious, in an absent-minded way, of a further note of emphasis—a single figure in the otherwise deserted court, a man who, with a frock-coat shining with rain, and a shapeless old silk hat, from whose battered brim the drops fell on his nose, stood lurching by the opposite railings, looking upward. As I put up my umbrella and stepped out into the rain he gave ever so slight a start, of nervousness, as

I conjectured, and made off in the direction of Holborn. He looked abject and deserted, and I gave him a sidelong glance in passing. He gave a sidelong glance at me, and shot his eyes away from mine in a mere fraction of a second. He was sufficiently miserable to look at, but just respectable enough to have a right to be offended by an offer of charity. I half expected his step to quicken, and could almost hear in fancy the thick voice which I knew must go along with that bibulous nose and the bibulous unsteady lips he had, murmuring the known formula about the poor man and the night's lodging. He came slopping on behind me, with the peculiar sucking noise at each footstep which broken boots make on a wet and level pavement, and I gave him a passing thought of pity and forgot him, as we have to forget scores of such phantoms every day in a great city.

I went to Bloomsbury Square, I remember, to call upon an acquaintance of mine, a musician, who had set some verses of mine to

music, and who had given me an appointment that evening to hear a professional tenor rehearse the song. I stayed an hour, I dare say, and then left. There, planted against the railings, was a dim gleaming figure, at such a distance that I should have not noticed him at all but for the chance light a gas-lamp cast upon his wet arm and shoulder, and his seedy shining hat. He would appear to have gone to sleep there, but the noise of the door which, escaping the maid-servant's fingers, slammed loudly behind me, made him jump into a bolt upright attitude, and I thought of the man in the court.

So far there was nothing in the world to make me believe that it was worth anybody's while to stalk me about London, and so I fancied this second sight of the man to be an accident. I went home and forgot him again. But next day about noon I turned to look at something in the street, and there was the man once more, slouching a score of yards behind. He turned away when I saw him,

and made believe to stare at a shop-window, but I observed one or two furtive glances in my own direction, and began to grow a little curious. I sauntered on and went round a corner, and then dropping my pace to a mere lounge, I went round a second corner and there waited. The shabby man almost walked against me—recoiled with a start, and then took the other side of the road. I affected to take no notice of him and lounged on again, and coming in a while to another main street, saw my man behind me still, this time by the aid of a big mirror in the shop-window of a carver and gilder. The shop-window was at a corner, and the mirror stood at an angle in it, giving a clear view of the road for two score yards. I began to suspect the shabby man of shadowing me for a purpose, and I walked about with no other meaning at all than to see if he would follow still, taking pains not to look as if I knew anything of his presence. It became quite clear at last that the man was really following me;

and when I had led him a long ramble I bent my way homewards. When I had come within a minute's walk of Warwick Court I quickened my steps to a good round pace, and once within its shelter, ran. I passed the iron gate, turned to the left, and then marched leisurely down Brownlow Street back into Holborn. There, at the corner of Chancery Lane, was my man in converse with another, a gentleman in a skin cap, short trousers, and big highlows. My original follower went down Chancery Lane, the man in the skin cap crossed the street and took up his stand at a corner of the entrance to the court. I went away to luncheon, pretty certain of finding him there when I came back again, wondering what on earth this evident espionage meant, and perhaps exciting myself about it a little more than necessary.

Late in the afternoon I went back to chambers, and after waiting for half an hour, took another ramble. As I expected, the man in the highlows was so good as to fol-

low me everywhere, to wait outside a house in which I made a prolonged call, and to accompany me at a judicious distance home again. I went straight up to Pole's chambers, and found him engaged with a book and a cigar. He opened the door with the book in his hand, and threw it on to the sofa as he entered the sitting-room before me.

'Well,' he said cheerfully, 'what's the news?'

I told him my curious experience of the last four-and-twenty hours. At first he said, 'Nonsense,' and laughed, but when I began to describe the experience in detail he grew serious, and proposed that we should at once go out together and investigate the matter. I consented to this quite eagerly. I described the men before we started, so that he should be able easily to identify them. We walked into Holborn and caught no sight of either of them.

'Let us take a quiet way,' I said, 'and see what happens.'

We steered our course for the great west-central squares, which at that hour lay silent and almost deserted. We walked slowly, both keeping a keen look-out, and before we had made half a dozen turnings Pole began to think that there was something in it. A pinched, wispy little man, in disreputable black, took the same way as ourselves, with a persistence which would have been very singular if it had been accidental. When we began to be pretty sure of him we veered about and met him. He passed us without a look or a sign, and two minutes later he was following us upon our backward track.

'There is no doubt about it,' Pole confessed. 'You are being followed. What is the meaning of it?'

I could not make a guess, but my nerves began to thrill a little at the notion of this unwearying stealthy watch. There was a mystery in it which was certainly not altogether agreeable, and was yet not without its charm.

'We will discomfit this gentleman,' said Pole. 'I am going to ask him what he means by it.'

I asked him to wait a moment. I thought I saw a better way than he suggested. There could be nothing got out of the man by questioning him, but I proposed to hunt the hunter and find out where he went and by whom he was employed. It was absurd to suppose that he and his comrades were tracking me for the mere amusement of the adventure. They were set on by somebody and paid by somebody, though it was out of my power to guess why anybody should think it worth his while to mark me down in this way.

We stood at a dark corner discussing this question.

'Depend upon it, Pole,' I said, and before I could get any further the pinched little man slunk by us without a glance at either. 'We will part here,' I whispered a moment

later. 'Keep an eye on the fellow. See if he follows me again.'

We agreed upon this, said 'Good-night' to each other loudly, and took different ways.

I lit a cigar and sauntered slowly, to give my man a chance of keeping up with me. I was almost as anxious not to be lost sight of as I judged him to be to keep sight of me. I heard no following footsteps though the square was as silent as a desert, and I confess to many curious little shudderings as I went. I have never had any very distinguished opportunity of learning whether I am brave or a coward, and I am rather inclined to fancy that nobody can be sure of his own courage until it has been tested, but I think that most people would have felt nervous under the circumstances. It was not that I anticipated any bodily harm, for I was a match for the wispy old man and half a dozen like him, but imagination came into play, and a score of tingling adventures happened every minute.

I walked softly, and listened with all my might. I heard hundreds of imaginary sounds, but not a single noise which could reasonably be translated into that of a pursuing footstep, and at last I paused and turned. I was in a long, deserted, silent street, and from end to end there was not a living creature to be seen. I retraced my steps, and saw nothing, and after a time it became evident to my mind that the inexplicable pursuit had been abandoned. After lingering long to be assured of this, and having attracted the wondering regard of more than one policeman by my suspicious loiterings, I went home. Pole was there before me.

'The hunt is over for the time,' he said. 'I fancy the fellow understood the meaning of our manœuvre, and declined to be followed in his turn. Any way he made no further attempt to follow you, and I lost sight of him.'

We talked about the theme until we wore

it altogether threadbare, and then we went to bed. For a day or two as I went about the streets I looked around me to find some trace of the old watch, but seeing none I forgot it, until one evening, emerging from Warwick Court, I saw, sneaking along the opposite side of the way, my friend in the fur cap. I was naturally interested in him, and at first it tickled me somewhat to observe that he was slinking, and pausing, and peering, as if in pursuit of the old business with a new unconscious quarry ahead of him. I crossed over and dropped behind him, and, following his constant glances in one direction, discovered, with a sudden chill and start, that he was hunting my companion.

'And now,' said I to myself, 'we will find out what this extraordinary business means if I follow for a week.'

I had not to follow for a week as it turned out, but I got through as dull and weary an evening as I ever remember to have passed in my life. Pole turned into a restaurant,

and this reminded me that I myself was hungry, and that the object of my excursion from my chambers had been dinner. The man in the fur cap took up his post within sight of the entrance and waited there. I took up my post in sight of him, and waited also. The man smoked several pipes, and danced many shuffling dances on the pavement. The streams of traffic flowed this way and that, clocks boomed and clanged the quarters through the noises of the streets with a most unreasonable interval between. I grew absurdly hungry, and everybody who left the restaurant looked like Pole. I got to dread the eye of the policeman on his beat, and knew that I was a suspicious character. When I had waited an hour and a half, which felt like a dreary day, Pole emerged from the swinging doors and went home. The man in the fur cap followed him, and I followed the man in the fur cap.

At the foot of Warwick Court the spy found an associate, and after a whispered

word or two with him moved off at a good round pace, leaving his confederate behind. I went after number one, determined to find where he might go. I had a second wait whilst he refreshed himself at a public-house. I peered through the glass door, and saw him engaged with a pork pie and a pewter pot. It began to rain, and if the whole thing had been less mysterious and had seemed less important I could have easily found it in my heart to resign the chase.

At last patience was rewarded, and the man coming again upon the street, turned up his collar against the rain, plucked the fur cap over his eyes, and walked away with an air of decision. He paused after a lengthy walk before a private house in a respectable street, knocked, and was admitted. The door was no sooner closed behind him than I ran to it, and by the light of a near lamp read the inscription upon the brass plate:

Mr. Goldsmith, Solicitor.

CHAPTER XII

I STOOD at the door for a time sunk deep in thought, and by and by I began to get a glimmering of insight, though no more. I had only just begun to move away when the door re-opened and the man in the fur cap and the big highlows came out and passed me. I touched him on the arm and he turned his head and paused.

'I want a word or two with you, if you please,' I said.

'What if I don't please?' he asked. He had not actually brought his footsteps to a halt, but was moving on lingeringly with a backward stare at me.

'I think you will,' I answered, persuasively jingling a handful of silver in my

pocket, 'if I make it worth your while. Have you any objections to a drink, to begin with?'

Well, no, he said he hadn't, not so far as *he* knowed. I asked him to be so good as to pilot me to a place where we might have a moment's talk in quiet.

'I'll show you the way, right enough,' he answered, 'but you needn't think as you're agoing to get anything out o' me. I can pay for my own drinks when I want 'em.'

I made no response to this, and he, turning a corner, led me down a by-street and into a public-house. A barman dozed behind the pewter counter, and but for him the place was empty. I gave my spy a glass of hot rum and water, and for form's sake asked for a bottle of lemonade. When I paid for these I pulled out all the money I had in my pocket precisely as Mr. Goldsmith would have done. I had perhaps three pounds about me, and I saw my friend of the fur cap looking at it as

if he would like it to change hands, I thought.

'Now,' I asked him, 'you don't believe in selling anything for nothing, do you?'

'No,' he said, shivering agreeably after his first gulp of hot rum and water; 'I ain't one o' that sort.'

Nobody would have expected anything of the sort, I told him, from so shrewd-looking a fellow. I thought of the Inspector Buckett, and was resolved to be complimentary.

'But now,' I said, 'I want you to tell me one or two things.' I put a half-crown on the pewter counter and looked at him. He shook his head decisively. I set another on the top of it, and looked at him again, and again he shook his head, this time with something of a mournful sneer. He still made negative signs when four half-crowns lay one upon another before him, but they were less decided than before. 'Very well,' I said, feigning to observe plain acquiescence in his manner. 'Half to begin with, the

other half afterwards.' I held out five shillings towards him. He lingered for a moment, but no more.

'What is it?' he asked, as he pouched the coins.

'You are employed by Mr. Goldsmith?' I asked. He contented himself with a nod. 'He set you on to follow me?' He shook his head and smiled. 'Who set you on to follow me?'

'Nobody,' he answered; 'that was a herror.'

'Ah! I thought so. You were employed to follow Mr. Pole?'

Again he nodded.

'Why do you follow Mr. Pole?'

'I'm paid for it,' he answered.

'Exactly. But what do you want to find out about him?'

The man looked about him suspiciously, finished his drink, and moved towards the door with an almost imperceptible nod of invitation for me to follow. I obeyed the

signal, and he led me through a little maze of streets. I stopped him at length by declaring that I would go no farther.

'The potman was a-listening,' he said wheezily; 'I could see it by the way he 'eld 'is 'ed. My place is worth a lot more than ten shilling.'

'Very likely,' I answered; 'but I don't want you to lose your place. I want you to keep it. Tell me, what do you want to find out about Mr. Pole?'

'The orders is,' he answered, leaning forward and pouring his spirituous breath into my face, 'to see where he goes, and who he meets—specially one place and one person.'

'What is the place?' I asked.

'House in Cromwell Terrace,' he answered.

'And the person?'

'A young female as live in the house.'

'Of course you know no reason why this is being done?'

'The governor don't tell *me* a lot; you can bet your 'at on that, sir.'

There was no more to be made of him for the time, and I paid him his five shillings and parted from him, but not before I had ascertained that he knew my name and address, and had arranged with him to communicate with me in case anything should come to his knowledge. I had very little compunction in employing this personage to act against his original employer, and as I walked home, Spenser's line about entire affection hating nicer hands came into my mind, and justified me altogether.

It was embarrassing to take the news of my discovery to Pole, and I was conscious of a feeling which I knew of course to be altogether ridiculous, that I was interfering in his affairs, and prying into concerns which he desired to keep secret. But it was not a matter for any foolish delicacy, and I seized the first chance I had of laying it before him.

He tried hard to preserve his ordinary

look of impassivity, and listened with his shoulders lounging against the wall, his hands in his pockets, and his head leaning sideways.

'You ask me nothing!' he said when I had done.

'Why should I ask you anything?' I demanded in return.

'You must think it all very exceptional and strange.'

Of course it was exceptional and strange, and I admitted as much to myself and to him.

'Don't take my silence as a sign of indifference or unfriendliness,' I said at last. 'I will ask you that, but I don't care to ask you any more.'

He left his lounging place by the wall and took several turns about the room. Then he stopped and laid a hand upon my shoulder.

'There are no suspicions, no accusations, in your mind?'

'My dear fellow, no.'

'Denham!' he said suddenly, seating himself before me, 'I don't know what to do. I don't know how I ought to act.'

I did not know, I answered, that my advice could be of service to him.

'In plain English,' he said after a time, 'here is my trouble. Ought I to publish the fact of this miserable marriage?'

I had thought over this question so often and so long that I had my answer ready.

'The reasons against the publication are obvious enough. What are the reasons for it?'

'They are obvious enough also—some of them. Here is the name of a most spotless and admirable lady coupled with mine. You coupled them together in your mind, once at least; my wife couples them. That old snob and tuft-hunter Delamere is trying his hardest to couple them, in fact. Dr. Fish is full of hints and smiles. I don't believe—I don't believe Miss Delamere cares two straws for me. I suppose I must have let it be seen at

one time that I cared a great deal more than two straws for Miss Delamere.'

It cost him a great effort to say this. He spoke in a tone of affected lightness, which afforded as poor and thin a disguise as I can remember to have known. When I looked at him his face was pale, and he was looking fixedly before him. The confession came upon me with a great shock, and I understood in the light of it many things which had hitherto been dark to me. Here was half the tragedy I had been afraid of.

'I made that wretched marriage,' he went on, after a lengthy silence—'never mind why. I thought I was acting very nobly and loftily, and so on, and I found out that I had acted like a fool. Who is it says we reserve our keenest repentances for our virtues? I was married, anyhow, and tied for life. You have seen my wife, and there's no need to describe her to you, or to talk about her at all. We lived together for a month, and then parted. I met Miss Dela-

mere some time afterwards. I won't say that I fell in love with her.' He was talking in a hard, dry voice, and with a manner as dry and hard as solid people of deep-rooted feeling do when they are greatly moved. 'I formed a very high opinion of her. I thought her the most admirable woman I had ever known, and,' he added very doggedly, 'I think so still. In a while I began to see that other people were becoming aware of my opinion. Her father was aware of it, and resented it as an impertinence, until an accidental death or two put me in reasonable distance of a great future and a peerage. Then he changed his mind, as might have been expected of him.'

He rose then and paced steadily to and fro with his chin upon his breast.

'One night,' he went on, 'old Dr. Fish poked a foolish joke at me about an approaching marriage, and that decided me. I never went near the Delameres' house again until I went with you, and then I thought the

folly had blown over. It seems to have revived and sprung to life again, and I must stop away again and put an end to it.'

'It will certainly be wise to do so,' I said.

'It's rather hard lines too,' he added, with that irritating assumption of not caring, which, after all, I was compelled to admire. For my own part when I am hurt I cry out prodigiously. When I am in trouble I want somebody to whom to pour out my complaints—a friend to share my burden. 'It's brutally hard lines when you come to think of it.'

'I fancy,' I said, 'that your wife and Goldsmith can have but little knowledge of you.'

'My wife and Goldsmith have very little knowledge of me,' he answered. 'They have but very little knowledge of the case at all, it would seem. I don't think I'm much of a coxcomb, Denham?'

He put this question with something very like his usual natural air, and I laughed as I answered. Not much of a coxcomb, I was inclined to fancy.

'Then I can say what is on my mind to say. It's no compliment to a man when a woman falls in love with him, because women constantly fall in love with utterly worthless people. They fall in love with ugly fellows, they fall in love with men who are dazzlingly stupid, or mean, or base. It's quite on the cards that a woman might fall in love with me. It's a recognisable possibility. Eh?'

'Quite a recognisable possibility.'

'Then what should the sensitive creature do who desires to save a hypothetical young woman from wasting her affections? What should a tender-hearted man in my position, reading the first signs of dawning affection, do to shield the poor creature from the blight?'

'For Heaven's sake, Pole,' I besought him, 'don't talk in this bitter way. Upon my soul, you are worse than wormwood.'

'Yes,' said Pole drily, biting off the end of a cigar. 'I'm a great deal worse than wormwood.'

'Look here, Pole,' I said, rising and laying a hand upon him. 'It's no use beating about the bush any longer, and hurting each other with pretences. You'd best let it be known at Cromwell Terrace that you are married, and then all the trouble, and all the chance of trouble will be over.'

'I said just now I wasn't a coxcomb,' he answered with a bitter lightness. Then looking sideways at me with a face as white as marble, he asked, 'You think *she* cares?'

'I think she may. I know nothing. I have seen nothing. She may come to care.'

'All right,' he answered, throwing the cigar into the fireplace. 'Go and cry it on the housetops. Look here, old chap.' He gripped my arm, and pushed me to and fro more strongly than he knew. 'We won't say any more about it now. I've got some letters I ought to write, and—and some things to think about. Come up to-morrow, will you? Good-night.'

We shook hands, and I left him. I don't

suppose I could feel anybody's grief to-day as I felt his then. We grow selfish as we grow older, and our own cares absorb us. But at that time I had no trouble of my own that was worth the thinking of, and it is simple truth that I loved him like a brother. I went away heavy-hearted, and in my own lonely room I listened to the sound of his footsteps overhead, to the unnumbered little noises which bespoke disordered and hasty movements and a troubled mind for hours.

In the morning, among my letters I found a note from Pole.

'I have been thinking,' he wrote, 'of our last night's talk. I have come to the conclusion that it will be best to make a clean breast of it. I am going down to Worborough. The old man will be grieved, I know, but I must tell him with my own lips. I authorise you to speak about the matter where you will. There is no need for discretion, and you may tell anybody.

Tell Fish, and he will save you all further trouble.'

If there was anything made clear by the resolve thus expressed, it was Pole's fear lest Mary Delamere should come to care for him in her ignorance of his position. And if anybody who knows the facts chooses to think the fear coxcombical, I need hardly say that I am very far indeed from being in agreement with him.

CHAPTER XIII

I COULD not remember to have had a task more embarrassing laid upon me. It was not merely embarrassing, but downright painful, even in the mere contemplation of it. And yet it was so evidently the only thing to be done that it was not to be evaded. Pole went down to Worborough Court as he had promised, and I was left alone to fulfil my part of the bargain made between us.

I had let almost the whole of the first day slide by without action, and had constantly tested myself with rehearsals of the disclosure I had to make. The fact that I was fully authorised to make it had next to no effect upon my mind. Look at it how I would it seemed to wear the air of an in-

tolerable impertinence. But, as I wandered disconsolate down Piccadilly that night, trying to summon up resolution to get the matter over, I encountered no less a person than the Reverend Doctor Fish. He was beaming, as he always beamed, and overflowing with that fatuous and indiscriminating kindliness which marked his aspect in the world at large. We shook hands with great cordiality.

'How do you do, my young friend, how do you do? Rambling? Philosophising? A charming night for the time of year, but cold.'

'Doctor Fish,' said I, plunging *in medias res*, 'I have something to say to you.'

The old gentleman stopped short and looked at me with an almost ludicrous air of alarm. I became awkwardly aware of a somewhat too tragic intensity in my own tone and manner.

'I have been asked,' I continued, taking him by the arm and leading him along,

'to make public a certain painful piece of news.'

The old gentleman, with his hat perched on the back of his head and his face turned up to mine with an expression of alarmed bewilderment, ambled beside me.

'Pole,' I said, 'has gone down to Worborough Court to see Lord Worborough, and to make to him the same statement which he authorises me to make to his friends in general.'

'God bless my soul!' said Dr. Fish.

'There were reasons,' I went on, delaying, in a sufficiently lame and impotent fashion, what I had to say, 'why the thing should not have been made generally known before. But there are now reasons — very urgent reasons—why it should be known.'

Dr. Fish said 'God bless my soul!' again, and ambled on, holding his umbrella tightly at the middle, and gasping at me open-mouthed.

'Pole,' I said, making quite a desperate

effort, 'some years back contracted a most miserable and unhappy marriage.'

The doctor stopped, withdrew his arm, and faced me in speechless amazement.

'His wife is living still. I have met her twice, and I can thoroughly understand the reasons which prompted him to concealment. But now his changed position, and certain other circumstances which it is not necessary that we should talk about——'

'My dear young friend,' said the doctor, laying his hand upon my arm, 'we will say nothing whatever about them.' I had not expected so much delicacy from him. 'I can see reasons; I can see one or two reasons. The poor misguided boy! Dear me! Such prospects! This will be a blow to his lordship. Quite right and wise on the poor boy's part to make the thing known. Quite right and wise. But who is the lady? Is she—is she—anybody?'

I told him that I knew nothing whatever of Mrs. Pole's antecedents; that she looked

and spoke as if she might have been a lady; but, I added, whatever her antecedents might have been, she was utterly impossible as a life-companion for her husband.

I had always known the old gentleman to be of a feeling and sympathetic turn, but I seemed now to have done him less than justice. He was very much moved indeed by the intelligence I had given him, and when we had resumed our progress westward he walked in silence for full five minutes, sighing every now and again, and shaking his head quite mournfully. After this, however, I fancied that I began to discern a sort of sad complacency in his manner, and I do not think I am far wrong in supposing that he found a compensation for this mournful news in the fact that he was authorised to spread it abroad.

'There is, of course,' he said, 'no possibility of a mistake in this? You understand, John, that if this story is to be repeated it must be no guess-work.'

I told him anew that Pole himself desired the fact to be made known, and parted from him shortly afterwards with a feeling that I had been unwarrantably meddling with my friend's affairs. So far as the casting abroad of the news could go, the thing was over and done with. It was quite certain, as I knew, that the intelligence would reach all for whom it was intended, and a few chance thousands outside that limited circle. As a matter of fact it was public property in a week, for the earliest precursor of the great tribe of society journals got hold of it, and printed it in a paragraph, the purposed mystery of which blinded nobody. We have grown quite accustomed nowadays to the invasion of what used to be called the sanctity of private life; but at this time the publication of this kind of detail was new in our experience, and Pole and I were not unnaturally angry at it.

It served Pole's purpose in one marked way, however, inasmuch as it brought under Mr. Goldsmith's notice the fact that all

attempt to preserve secrecy had been abandoned, and so took one weapon out of hands which were not likely to be over-scrupulous. It did this very completely, for the final line of the paragraph ran thus :—'It is a significant fact that the husband has himself decided to publish the news of the marriage he has hitherto so successfully concealed.' I thought it probable at the time that the writer might not altogether know of what the fact was significant, and I have since remarked that the journalistic capacity for indicating significances and incapacity for actually seeing them, are a part of the newspaper man's mental outfit.

When once I had set the news afloat I became actually tormented by the desire to know how it was received in Cromwell Terrace. The very force of my sympathy served to keep me away for a week or two, and I felt so awkward about the whole melancholy business that if it had not been for Clara's presence in the house I should

probably have avoided Mr. Delamere's residence for ever. I have said nothing of the progress of my own personal affairs during the last month or two, and yet that progress was noticeable and rapid. Looking back to almost any period of life, and taking up any thread of existence, it is curious to notice how the contemplation of that one line will, for the moment, belittle the others. By dint of thinking of it you may make almost any episode of your life look disproportionately large, and I suppose that one of the chief difficulties to be surmounted in the relation of one's own history is provided by this very tendency. I will be careful at least not to exaggerate one line. To go back to all those tender hopes and foolish fears, to recall them for but a minute or two in the silence of my own study, is at once to make them dominate all other incidents and feelings in my remembrance of the time. Pole was my friend, and I shall not easily be persuaded that many men have found a friend more

entirely and devotedly at their service in heart and deed. But, after all, he occupied but a mere corner of my life, and every other nook and cranny of it was crammed full of Clara.

I have it on the authority of my wife that I might have spared myself all the ecstasies of despair in which at this time I revelled. I respond by declaring that, though I might have wished to escape them then, I should have been a most mistaken man to do it. Curious! How one looks back from the haven of middle age, where no tempest can toss the heart's barque on that vexed ocean any more, and thinks how enviable that despairing, wrecked, and drowning mariner really was! What happy, fairy islands of safety sprang up sometimes in mid-ocean, when the tempest was at its loudest! What gleams of heavenly blue broke through the dividing storm! Everybody but the most insensible knows these things, everybody loves to recall them. The

love-stories of purely fictitious personages make up ninety per cent of the world's literature, and one finds, now and again, the most elderly, sober-minded, and commonplace old people renewing their own youth in a pretty, rose-coloured No Man's Land which has Jack and Jill for inhabitants.

These sentimental reflections will have made it clear to any person of average discernment that a prolonged absence from the house graced by Miss Grantley's presence was impossible to the present writer. He stayed away, this present writer, until he could stay away no longer; a full ten days, as I remember; and then, with a transparent pretence of having some reason apart from the only one he acted on, he made a call.

I had seemed to be guilty of an impertinence in speaking of Pole's affairs, though he had authorised me to do it, but the sense I felt then of my own insolent intrusiveness was not a thousandth part so strong as that

which suddenly assailed me when I saw Miss Delamere. A great change had fallen upon her. Her beauty had never been of the robustest order, but now, to my terror and sorrow, she had grown shadowy, so pale and ethereal she looked. She smiled with all her accustomed sweetness when she shook hands with me. There was not the faintest hint of any expression in her face which asked for pity, and yet I knew that she had passed through a time of dreadful trouble. I have had intuitions enough in my time to know that they can be true, and to be certain that they can be absurd. Yet not even the after-proof of knowledge added or could add to the certainty of her love for Pole, which at that instant flooded and filled my mind. I knew it, and I was, beyond expression, ashamed of myself for knowing it.

I contrived, in a roundabout way, to inquire if Miss Grantley were at home, and learned that she was out on a visit to some old friends of her mother's in the neighbour-

hood. I do not think now that there was any intention in Miss Delamere's manner, but I thought so then; and between my own shyness and my pity for her I fell into a state of complete discomfort. Under these conditions, even the arrival of Jones was a thing to be welcomed. He came in with Mr. Delamere; and Mary, taking out some trifle of embroidery, assumed an abstracted air, and feigned to be closely occupied with it. I suppose it is not easy for a woman of brains and sensibility to throw her whole soul into the contemplation of stitches, and it was very evident to me that, however closely she might seem to be engaged upon her task, she followed the talk which took place amongst us.

Mr. Delamere was unusually magnificent that evening. He had an air of having done, or undertaken to do, some act of Christian magnanimity towards somebody, and was full of pitying condescensions to the world at large. Jones was in something of the same

mood, but in him it was tempered by a rare hilarity.

'I suppose,' said Mr. Delamere, 'that there could be nothing more stupid than to be angry at stupidity. There is a sense in which patience is the best of the virtues. A wise discrimination lies at the root of a virtuous patience. One is not angry because a fifty-six pound shot has not the lightness of a feather, or because a feather has not the ponderosity of the shot. In fine, one accepts things.'

Jones smiled at this.

'One accepts things,' he said, 'on one of two conditions.'

'Your conditions?' demanded Mr. Delamere, leaning back in his chair and setting the tips of his fingers delicately together.

'That the things accepted should be either unavoidable or in themselves acceptable.'

They were both clever men, Delamere and Jones, but they were a weariness to my flesh and spirit. They would sit for hours solemnly

trotting out for one another's admiration their commonplaces of the philosophical copy-book, until I tingled from head to foot. It seemed to me that the kind of converse they took delight in was either not very acceptable in itself, or quite unalterable, and I knew that they were working their way towards the question of Pole's marriage just as well as they did.

'Human nature,' said Mr. Delamere, with that air of catholic wisdom and plenary allowance which is of all human aspects the most irritating and hateful to my mind; 'human nature is a poor mixed thing.'

'Subtly compounded, sir,' said Jones; 'subtly compounded.'

'Solomon touches it,' said Delamere. 'The fly in the ointment; the fly in the ointment. One may have known a man for years—have watched him, have analysed him, boasted to oneself one's understanding of him, when there comes some unlooked-for injection, and the chemical character of the

whole human mass is changed. Now, for instance——'

Miss Delamere was busy at her embroidery, and I at a little distance sat watching her as I listened. She had looked up once, and until now once only, and then our eyes had encountered. A glance need not endure long to express many things, and for a very little space of time indeed, whilst she was unconscious of my gaze, her own expressed a most mournful lassitude and despondency; but becoming aware of me she gave one of her bright, customary smiles of recognition, and went back to her embroidery. Now again, at this 'for instance' of her father's, she looked up from her work, her forehead faintly knitted, and her whole face pained and puzzled.

'For instance,' Delamere went on, not noticing her, but turning with a gracious condescension upon me, 'this affair of your friend Pole's, Denham. I rather pride myself, not altogether, as I fancy, without reason,

upon being something of a judge of character. I should have supposed your friend Pole to have been a man whose whole instincts would have been diametrically opposed to the facts as we now know them. I should have regarded any such union as he has formed as being quite outside the sphere of possibility for him.'

'May one ask,' said Jones, 'what virtues Mr. Pole was specially gifted with which would have seemed to make this step impossible for him?'

'In the first place,' said Delamere, 'no man of lofty honour can contract a secret marriage. I had supposed Pole to be a man of lofty honour.'

I said, in something like a tone of challenge, I am afraid, that Pole was a man of lofty honour. I added, warmly, that I knew no man whose code of honour was purer, or who better acted up to it. Before I had well spoken I was angrier with myself for having done so than I was at the stupidity of the

pair who could not see that they were sticking pins and needles into the heart of their silent listener.

Mr. Delamere raised his glasses in a way that indicated that he was not to be disturbed from his own philosophical serenity by the intrusion of any inferior intelligence upon his sphere of thought. The observation of this helped to cool me a little, for it threw a touch of humour into my thoughts; and though the humour was a little bitter it was more agreeable than mere anger.

'A man who contracts a secret marriage,' pursued Delamere, 'necessarily imposes himself upon society under false pretences. A man with such a tie upon him has no right to go into the world and move about in it as though he were unfettered. In a country whose social institutions resemble those of England; in a country, that is to say, where young people of both sexes meet and mingle in a constant innocent freedom of intercourse, and where marriages are made, not by the

manœuvring of parents, but chiefly by the choice and free will of the contracting parties, the secret marriage of a young man of wealth and position amounts to nothing less than a crime against society. You, or you,' he turned from Jones to me, and addressed us each in turn, 'may be excused for supposing that a young lady in her choice of an associate for life ought not to be actuated by pecuniary consideration or influenced by rank. I do not stop to consider now whether a young lady should or should not permit her mind to be influenced by wealth and rank. I content myself by affirming that the very large majority are as a matter of fact so influenced.'

I felt bound, for two reasons, one of which was a great deal stronger than the other, to take a part in the talk and to fight Pole's battle. The first reason, though it counted very little for the moment, was founded on the friendship he and I had for one another. The second and the stronger was this: if I

kept silence I was in danger of appearing to give a special significance to Delamere's attack, and I was afraid that his daughter might attribute my silence to a fear of hurting her. So, in my guilty knowledge of her own sad secret, I had to take my share in wounding her in order not to wound.

'I beg your pardon, Mr. Delamere,' I said, with as respectful an air as I could muster, 'but you forget that Pole himself divulged the secret, just as soon as wealth and rank seemed to be coming his way. What his reasons for concealment were at first I do not pretend to know, but you argue what you do know into what you can't know in judging of a man as in judging of anything. Pole is a man of high honour—*ergo*, Pole had nothing dishonourable in his mind when he kept his marriage secret under conditions of which we are ignorant.'

I was so placed that I could see Miss Delamere's face in the mirror, and I caught

a look of gratitude for my defence of my friend.

'I for one,' said Mr. Delamere coldly, 'am not inclined to be overstrained in my ideal of social duty, but I think your friend's conduct inexcusable. Do you happen to know, Denham,' he asked a moment later, 'who is the—the person he has married?'

I answered in the negative, looking as natural and unembarrassed as I could. Was it possible, I asked myself, that he could be blind to his daughter's pallor and languor and ignorant of their cause? Every word we spoke must have been a pain to her, but nothing could be so painful as to guess that I knew of what she suffered. The two complacent philosophers went on, and I was compelled to look as stupid as they were in fact. My only chance for tact lay in seeming quite tactless, and I succeeded well enough to disarm suspicion in Miss Delamere's mind.

'For my own part,' she said quietly and

with complete self-possession, 'I think Mr. Pole very much to be pitied. I do not know if he is to be blamed as well. That is quite possible, of course, but I don't think it very probable.'

'My dear Mary,' returned her father, 'it is very necessary that you should form just views upon such a question as this. What are the conceivable reasons for a clandestine marriage? First, a *mésalliance* on one side or the other. Next, an evasion of authority on one side or the other. Then consider that the deceit is carried into life, and becomes a part of it. No, no; I cannot conceive of a secret marriage as the act of a high-minded man. I can understand, Denham, that you find the theme a painful one, and I admit that it would be Quixotic to quarrel with a friend who will one day be able so favourably to influence your own career.'

I suppose it really would have been Quixotic to have closed Delamere's doors against myself by resenting his implied opinion of

the value of my friendship. Any way I kept silence, though Jones's smile of assent almost forced me to unclose my lips. I had hardly ever been so angry in my life as this dull couple made me, but fortunately there came a diversion, and the question was laid on one side. Miss Grantley came in, and after a time Delamere challenging Jones to a game at chess, they retired together to the smoking-room; and a little later Mary, gathering her belongings into a little basket of quilted silk-work, slipped from the room, leaving us together for a time.

Clara and I had come to that stage in which young people are aware already of what is uppermost in each other's minds and are forced into an unusual air of *cameraderie* and freedom. We talked with great gaiety, with grisly silences between, and would rather break these pauses by any kind of nonsense than leave them to grow intolerable.

'You used constantly to talk of your friend Mr. Pole, Mr. Denham,' said Clara in

one such moment of extremity. 'You have not spoken of him all the evening.'

'We were talking of him at the moment of your arrival,' I answered. 'Mr. Delamere spoke very angrily of him and I defended him.'

'You ought not to have defended him,' she answered warmly. 'I think he has behaved——'

She went no farther, but it was enough for confirmation.

'I cannot see,' I answered, 'that he behaved ill in any way. I know that he is profoundly unhappy, though he allows nobody to see it.'

'A man may be unhappy,' she rejoined, 'but he has no right——' And there she paused again.

I was guilty of an indiscretion, but I can find ample excuses for myself.

'No right to do what?' I asked. She gave no answer. 'No right to make others unhappy? Do you think, Miss Grantley,

that he ever guessed it? He is not a coxcomb who goes about in fear of breaking ladies' hearts.'

'You say very odd things, Mr. Denham,' she answered with an air of fine simplicity, and the most barefaced pretence of not understanding me, and of having offered no provocation for this outburst. 'I am not likely to be brought to your opinion of Mr. Pole. I think him very horrid.'

'You are quite wise not to understand me,' I answered, and turned the conversation. She was content to escape from her own share of the responsibility of entering upon it, but as our intimacy grew this broken beginning of confidence was taken up again. I don't know at this day how our own courtship would have grown if it had not been for the unhappy heart-affairs of Pole and Mary Delamere. We should have found some other way to sympathy, no doubt, but as it happened that was the road we travelled. Her love for Mary and my affection for Pole

led us back to the theme a thousand times, and by and by we talked of it openly to each other and with no pretence of disguise. She was Mary Delamere's one confidante, and even she, it seems, was left to guess a prodigious deal more than she was told. Of course I knew we were a sinfully indiscreet and curious young couple to talk of the affairs of others as we did; but then we had countless examples, and we were on such a footing of intimacy that we had no secrets from each other, with the exception of one which was rather less of a secret to our world at large than even to ourselves.

CHAPTER XIV

JONES, who in Pole's phrase came Sebastian Dolmering into my chambers pretty often, came down one day about a month after the disclosure in a more than commonly sprightly humour. I had never liked him from the first hour, but he seemed to be altogether unconscious of a want of friendly warmth on my part, and was himself so uniformly amiable that it was impossible to quarrel with him. There was indeed nothing special about which we could have quarrelled. Jones was a humbug, but then there are so many humbugs in the world that if a man took it upon himself to quarrel with all of them whom he encountered he would have his hands full. The sterner sort of moralist may, if he

pleases, decline to hold intercourse with all men who do not come up to his own lofty standard. The average creature, conscious of his own imperfections, must rub along with such society as he can get, and take folks as he finds them. Considering how very little Jones ever cared for me, and considering that I had at best a dormant contempt for Jones, it was really remarkable to see how well we got on together.

He was always wonderfully attired, and his appointments were as finished and natty as those of the finest fine lady. He used to smoke cigarettes of scented tobacco bound in rose-coloured paper, and he carried about him numberless little nicknacks for personal use. One of his favourite occupations was to polish his nails, and for that purpose he carried about with him a tiny gold-plated box of some sort of powder and a little pad of leather. He would polish and polish whilst he talked of art and the destinies of humanity and other noble and inspiring themes, and

would make his shining nails gleam this way and that way by turning them against the light, and would admire them with his head on one side, whilst he paused for a descriptive phrase or rounded a denunciatory period.

Early in our acquaintance I used to have almost unconquerable impulses to assault Jones whilst he aired these engaging little ways of his. But in a while they ceased to exasperate, and in a little while further began to amuse, and then to soothe. It was consolatory to reflect that in the depth of one's daily descents into imbecility, one never fell to that; so that at the most despondent moments Jones came as a sort of invigorator, toning the moral system, and bringing encouragement to the feeble.

On this particular day he came in, as I have said, in an unusually sprightly humour. He cracked a gentle joke or two, and that bespoke the very highest spirits in him, an almost reckless abandonment to gaiety. As a rule, Jones was afraid of a joke, and would

almost as soon have sat in the same room with a humorist as with a mixed barrel of lucifer-matches and fireworks. Pole, for instance, who had much more of a habit of thinking than of talking humorously, made Jones uncomfortable by his very aspect. He looked dangerous. There was never any knowing when, and in what direction, he might explode, and Jones's mental parlour was trim and decorous, and full of fragile curios. He had no liking for the exhibition of catherine-wheels and sky-rockets in that delicately furnished, but limited enclosure.

I told him how bright he looked, and how uncommonly gay he was, and he smiled back, well pleased, pulling off his pretty lemon-coloured gloves in the finest and most lady-like manner. He examined his finger-nails with scrupulous exactitude, smiled in the mirror to inspect his teeth, arranged his hair with a few dexterous feminine coaxings of the palms and fingers, and then lit one of his pretty little cigarettes, and sat down. I was

positively pleased to see him. For the first time I realised for myself the peculiar nature of his charm.

I felt it at once a duty and a privilege to make the most of him, and I tried to start him upon the question of the proposed revolution in the cut and colour of evening dress. Here he disappointed me. He spoke of it with a fervour which was too obviously unreal. The stream was too far from its source, and it flowed with a mournful paucity and languor. I tried to start him on the larger theme of the regeneration of the soul by means of Japanese lacquer and the best Dresden. Even here he would not dance to my piping with anything of his accustomed spirit and agility. In fine, it became evident that there was something upon Jones's mind, and in a while, after a circuitous fashion, it came out.

'Strange,' said Jones, after a pause of some duration, 'how closely the development of the individual soul follows the laws which

govern the development of the inert conglomerate mass.'

I assented, and, like Brer Rabbit, I lay low, and waited.

'Conditions,' said Jones, 'which even an acute observer would suppose to be permanent turn out to be transitory. When one says permanent,' he added with his explanatory air, which was always delightfully comforting to his listener's *amour propre*, 'one doesn't use the word, of course, with any pretence to scientific accuracy. Permanence, like other conditions, is only relative, and is impossible in the abstract.'

I said that it was very nice to know this; and Jones, who was too firmly seated on horseback to take note of any pebble in his conversational charger's track, rode on unregardful.

'I had supposed myself to be fully convinced upon one or two social questions upon which I now discover that my mind has undergone a change, imperceptible to myself in its processes, and yet radical.'

I said that I was very pleased to hear it, I was sure; and he went on, taking no more note of me than if he had been the hero in a Greek drama and I the Chorus.

'Take, for instance,' said Jones delicately, 'the question of marriage. I am not, as a matter of course, so mad or so blind as to attach any value to the absurd sanctions of the Church or the fallacious conclusions of society.'

I was quite sure that Jones was superior to those feeblenesses, and I said as much with warmth. For the first time he took notice of me, and seemed gratified by this testimonial.

At this moment Pole, who had been back from Worborough Court a week or two, strolled in without announcement of himself, and took a seat with one leg on either side a chair and his elbows on the back of it. He nodded to each of us, but said nothing. Jones, I thought, was momentarily disconcerted by the sight of him, but went on

directly, with some exaggeration of his best lady-like tone and manner.

'Yet,' he continued, 'I have begun to think of late that it is not well too suddenly to combat the preconceptions of average mankind. One can, of course, use satire, but it needs to be delicate and veiled, and the average man is, I fancy, unsusceptible to satire.'

'There are people,' I ventured to say at this juncture, seeing that Jones was perhaps a little unsteady in his seat to his own fancy, and needed bolstering there—'there are people on whom satire produces little effect. Some of them are clever in a way; rooted fools by nature, who bear a weedy little blossom of wit, and suppose themselves to flower all over, like rhododendrons in the season.'

'There,' said Jones, 'you touch the very men I have in mind. The average stupid man is not half so bad to deal with as the man who bears that single flower of wit you

speak of. For my own part, I am a bit of a philosopher. I am not merely open to conviction, which is the first attitude of common-sense, but I am willing to give and take, to pay tithe of mint, and anise, and cummin, even to the false deity of popular convention. I am willing to concede that though by lending the force of one's example to a doubtful practice one may delay the hour of its abolition, yet it is possible to subscribe to a social usage if it should not be too harmful to the general interest, and, having subscribed to it, still hold the right of holding up one's testimony against it. Marriage,' he continued, passing his hand through his lustrous Italian locks, and dividing them tenderly, 'has become precisely one of those questions to my mind, though a little while ago I should scarcely have thought such an allowance possible or desirable.'

'He has come in out of the desert,' said Pole. 'He has consented to be taken in and curry-combed.'

I do not think that the Reverend Laurence Sterne was likely to be one of Jones's literary favourites, and so it is possible that the true *nuance* of Pole's allusion escaped him. He went on, apparently unmoved.

'There are men,' he said, 'so pachydermatous by nature, and by cultivation or the want of it, that they are not to be touched by any shaft of reason.'

'You might,' said Pole, 'explode a fifty-six pound shell in the interior of some of them, and they'd go on quite calmly without the merest notion that anything had happened.'

Jones assented cordially.

'Upon my word,' he said, 'there are people of that pattern. But, for my own part, as I said before, I am open to conviction. I am willing to give and take.'

'I am willing,' said Pole, who was evidently in a bitter humour, and ready to relieve himself by any persiflage which might occur to him, 'to take anything I can lay my hands on.'

Jones cast a sideway glance of friendly allowance at him.

'In this matter of marriage,' he pursued, 'the whole question, as a matter of course, is a matter of contract. There are two personalities to be considered, and the stronger has, by reason of its very strength, a right to be allowing and indulgent to the weaker vessel.'

I knew that there was nothing in Jones's speech up till now to give me the merest hint of the intention he was trying in his own roundabout way to express. But that phrase about the weaker vessel hit me hard. I had used it to Pole by hazard, and it was its employment which had led to the explanation between us. I looked at Pole nervously, but he had evidently allowed it to pass without notice, as was only natural. I was so certain in my own mind of the truth of my own fancy, and was so embarrassed by it, that I began at once to move about the room as if the conversation had reached a

natural end, and there was no more to say. But Pole, having no share in my fancies and no divination of them, carried on the theme. He had grown very mocking and bitter of late, even with me, though never against me.

'I suppose,' he said, looking at Jones, 'you haven't been so cruel as to make the tidings of your conversion public property?'

'So cruel?' said Jones inquiringly.

'So cruel,' answered Pole. 'You haven't awakened expectations in a million tender bosoms which can only be fulfilled for one?' Jones said nothing, but smilingly lit a new cigarette, and cast the remnant of the old one into the fire. 'You're going to get married, Jones?' Pole went on. 'I say, Denham, there's a public-house at the corner. Let's go down, all three of us, and drink a pot of stout apiece to the health of Jones's future missis.'

'Upon my word, Pole,' said Jones, 'one would hardly think that you had been bred a gentleman.'

'We're all of the same base metal, Jones,' Pole answered; 'but the electroplate gets rubbed off some of us. There's an epergne belonging to a bachelor uncle of mine in which all the cherubs' noses are flat with their faces, though they are made of solid silver. I dare say they had the prettiest outlines once upon a time. There's no knowing what even you may come to. When I contrast what you are with what you might have been, and what you may be, I could weep, upon my word of honour.'

It seemed to me so very probable that Jones would by and by become aware of Pole's intention to insult him, and the intention in itself was so very obvious to me, that I feigned suddenly to remember an appointment. At this Jones got up to go, and I left with him, bidding him good-bye at the end of the court, and darting into Chancery Lane as if in a mighty hurry. When the threatened quarrel was averted I was still very far from being at ease; and though I

tried to attach no more value to my fancies than I could help, they clung to me with a ridiculous persistence. They worried me so much at last that, when I had dined alone, I betook myself to Cromwell Terrace. Mr. Delamere was dining out that evening, and Mary and Clara were alone together. When we had talked for a little while, our hostess slipped away, as she had got into a habit of doing, and left the two young people to themselves.

I had no ground to go on, but the question was so near my heart that I must needs approach it.

'Mr. Jones,' I said as lightly as I could, 'honoured my rooms this afternoon.'

'Pray,' returned Clara, with an acerbity and decision I had never noticed in her till then, 'don't talk to me of Mr. Jones. I have heard enough of Mr. Jones to last my lifetime.'

In spite of this command I ventured to ask if Jones had distinguished himself in

such a way of late as to earn this marked increase of her displeasure.

'Now, Mr. Denham,' said Miss Grantley decisively, 'I want you to understand that I shall look upon any pressure on this point as being unfriendly. I am literally dying to tell you all about it, and if you press me I shall give way. I know I shall, and I know that I ought not to. I'm sure that you are not the man to endanger a poor girl's self-respect.'

Whether the reader choose to believe it or not I accepted this as a prohibition, and found another theme for converse. But Miss Grantley fidgeted and, if one can say it of so gentle a creature, grew absolutely snappish. The dull, inapprehensive male intelligence was at a loss. I was meek and submissive, but full of doubts and wonders, not guessing what I could possibly have done to ruffle a temper commonly so gentle.

'You are very stupid this evening, Mr. Denham,' she said with a voice of dreary resignation.

'Am I?' I answered. 'I am afraid I am. You seem vexed. What have I done to vex you?'

I went on to say that I would rather do a variety of particularised dreadful things than cause her a moment's annoyance. She relented and explained, though still with a lingering touch of ill-humour.

'I tell you,' she said, 'that I am dying to tell you something, and I tell you that I ought not to say anything about it.'

'You begged me not to press you,' I answered, 'and I did not.'

'Precisely,' she said, dropping back into a corner of the sofa in a sort of languid comic despair.

'Oh!' I said, beginning to be enlightened, 'I ought to have asked? I ought to have pressed you?' A gleam of returning cheerfulness displayed itself in her countenance, and was instantly dismissed. 'Let me beg of you to tell me,' I implored with mock earnestness. 'I am consumed by curiosity.

If you refuse this prayer I cannot answer for the consequences.'

'In that case,' she replied demurely, 'I can reveal my secret. I cannot bear to see a fellow-creature suffer.'

She clasped her hands and, leaning forward, murmured with a subdued intensity of scorn,

'Mr. Jones has had the insolence to propose to Mary Delamere.'

'I hope with all my heart,' said I, 'that Miss Delamere will not throw herself away upon him.'

'I told her, when I heard of it,' said this resolute young person, who was sprouting this evening with unexpected characteristics, 'that I would never speak to her again if she did. There was not the slightest need to say so, for Mary has no more thought of uniting herself to that tinkling cymbal than I have.'

I confess that I was not in the least sorry for Jones's blighted hopes. I did not think

that any purpose he might form was likely to take great hold upon him. His sentiments were not of the sort that plant a terrible fixed foot, and are not rooted up without blood. I could fancy Jones deserting any sandy anchorage he might find, and getting under way with little compunction or regret for other shores.

'Mary,' said Clara decisively, but with a touch of very warm and very real sympathy, 'has troubles enough of her own and to spare already. As for what they are, that is no business of yours or mine or anybody's. I don't know, I'm sure, how such a girl came to have such a father. Mr. Delamere is wrapped up in his precious godson. They sit together, and the Sounding Brass flatters the Tinkling Cymbal, and the Tinkling Cymbal flatters the Sounding Brass, until I declare that my fingers itch to box the ears of both of them. I give you my word of honour, Mr. Denham,' she concluded, with an air of deep contrition, 'there are moments when the contemplation

of that pair makes me feel quite unladylike.'

I had never allowed myself so much latitude of expression with respect to Messrs. Delamere and Jones, but I accepted Miss Grantley's description with such cordiality that she was encouraged to continue.

'We have had a lecture from papa this morning,' she said. 'It was my privilege to hear it.' She assumed, upon a sudden, so ludicrous a resemblance to the Delamere voice and manner that I laughed aloud. I saw the dangled pince-nez swinging to and fro in the imitative fingers. It perched at times with a solemn grace upon the pert and pretty little nose, which somehow, to my wonderment, contrived for the moment to look like the aristocratically-refined beak of the great critic. But the words to me were the richest part of the imitation. 'Strange,' she began in the Delamere voice, 'how closely the development of the individual soul follows the laws

which govern the development of the inert, conglomerate mass.'

'Wait, wait!' I cried. 'Allow me. Conditions,' I pursued, 'which even an acute observer would suppose to be permanent turn out to be transitory. When one says permanent, one does not use the word, of course, with any pretence of scientific accuracy.'

Her eyes glittered, and she rose to her feet, dancing in a very revel of mirth.

'He has been with you this afternoon,' she said. 'He has poured all this out upon you. Oh, they're delicious! They make me so angry that I feel ashamed and wicked. But oh! I wouldn't miss them for the world!'

On the very top of this declaration Jones entered smilingly. I blessed my stars for his sake that he had not arrived a moment earlier. He had the run of the house, and came in and out like a member of the family, so that perhaps it was a little dangerous to discuss him with too much freedom there.

Miss Grantley's mirth was changed by a most sudden transformation. To have looked at her a second after Jones's arrival, one would have supposed her incapable of merriment.

'Miss Delamere?' said Jones, in his silvery voice, smiling from one to the other of us.

'I believe,' replied Miss Grantley, with a sudden overwhelming stateliness, 'that Miss Delamere has retired to her own room. I think it is not her intention to return again this evening. I wish you good-night, Mr. Denham.'

With that she sailed from the apartment, leaving Jones and myself looking at each other a trifle foolishly.

CHAPTER XV

The winter had been unusually severe, and the spring seemed to delay itself unconscionably. Every week the newspapers recorded the death of some elderly celebrity. Fog, rain, protracted frost, east winds, made havoc amongst the old and feeble. Lord Worborough was going. The impending title and great fortune hung over Pole, it would have seemed, like a threatening shadow. I am certain that he was so far from desiring either of them that if he could have seen a reasonable way of evading them he would willingly have taken it. Twice he went down to Worborough Court, and each time spent a week there in expectation of the old man's demise. His lordship rallied, and Pole came back

again, melancholy and bitter. He told me, at a moment when his mood was a little less harsh than it had grown commonly to be in those days, that Lord Worborough laid that unhappy marriage very much to heart. He was the seventh holder of the title, and had hoped that it would be transmitted through a long line.

'It's a dream,' said Pole. 'It doesn't matter much to him, poor old fellow. Whether the line may be extended or cut short will make no difference to him when he is tucked away under his green bed-clothes.'

He spoke very affectionately of the old man always, and to any one who had seen them together it was evident that his lordship, however disappointed he might be, had formed a very strong liking for the man who was to come after him.

It was raining heavens hard one memorable afternoon late in April, when Pole and I sat reading together, or making a pretence to read, in his chambers. A knock sounded

at the door, and I, being the nearer of the two, rose to open it. The visitor, of all unexpected men in the world, was the little Jew solicitor, Goldsmith. He wore a mackintosh, shining with rain from heel to shoulder, and carried a dripping umbrella in his hand. There was a very unusual and remarkable expression in his face, a look which impressed me very strongly, though I could neither analyse nor define it. He was pale, and labouring under some strongly suppressed excitement. He might, by the look of him, have been going to be hanged.

He walked past me into the room, leaving his umbrella in the stand, and when I had closed the door and entered after him, he was standing beside Pole, who, with an expression of surprised disdain, was looking at him over one shoulder.

'Well,' said Pole, curtly and contemptuously, 'what is your business?'

'Bister Pole,' said Goldsmith, whose breathing was hard and thick, like that of a

man who has been running beyond his pace, 'there are moments when rancour comes to nothing betweed gentlemen.'

'Are there indeed?' asked Pole.

'There are, indeed,' Goldsmith responded.

The little Jew's aspect had an influence upon Pole, as I could see plainly. He rose with an indefinable look, and wheeling his chair half round, rested one knee upon the seat, and with both hands grasping the back, surveyed the intruder.

'I suppose,' he said, 'that you have some sort of business here. Will you be good enough to get it over?'

For sole answer Goldsmith, with trembling fingers, began to unbutton his wet waterproof. The noise of his breathing, the ticking of a clock upon the mantelpiece, and the clatter of a burning coal which fell upon the fender, were the only audible sounds. Either Goldsmith's agitation made him clumsy, or the buttons of the waterproof were unusually refractory. He conquered them at last, and

producing a pocket-book from an inner pocket, he advanced a step or two and laid it on the table. It opened with a spring clasp, and revealed a bulky mass of papers. His agitated fingers wandered among these, leaving wet marks upon them, until at last he selected one from the rest, opened it, and laid it upon the table before Pole. I looked at Pole's face, and saw a sudden dreadful change in it. He glanced from the paper to Goldsmith, from Goldsmith to me, and back to the paper again, like a man dazed by a blow upon the head. Then recovering, he took the paper—a long blue slip—in both hands, and stared at it for a minute. After this he stretched it out to me, saying nothing.

Goldsmith's strained manner, and Pole's extraordinary reception of the document, had prepared me to find curious matter in it, but I had not in the least expected what I saw. It was a copy of the certificate of the death of Adelaide Pole. I looked at the date, and saw that the event had happened a week ago.

'She seebs,' said Goldsmith, who was more moved than I should have fancied possible about such a matter, 'to have gone off very quietly at the finish, poor thing.'

I glanced at the certificate again, and saw that spinal injury and shock were assigned as the causes of death. Pole took the paper from my fingers and sat down, as if to study it. The certificate rustled in his hands, and in a little while he laid it on the table and looked up at Goldsmith.

'How is it,' he asked, 'that I did not learn of this before?'

Goldsmith, before answering, turned over the papers from his pocket-book and selected another from amongst them. His hands were trembling more than ever, and his face was curiously mottled.

'I was in the country when the thing took place, Bister Pole,' he said in a choked voice. 'I was goig about from one town to another on business, and my letters got delayed. I didn't hear of the melancholy circubstance till

four days after it occurred. Then I despatched this telegram to my chief clerk. I only got back to town this morning. I thought it was best to bring the news personally.'

Pole took the telegram the little Jew extended to him, and having glanced over it, handed it to me. It ran thus: 'Moss, 215 Hatton Garden. From Goldsmith, Chester. Let funeral be decently conducted. Will myself communicate with husband.'

'This,' said Goldsmith, fumbling anew amongst his papers and selecting a third document, 'is the certificate of burial. I don't know, Bister Pole, whether you'd care to have any sort of memorial set up, or whether you'll take that into your own hands?'

His voice grew more muffled and tremulous as he spoke, and he had some ado to gather up the papers he had scattered about the table. I had never expected to find such signs of sensibility in the man, and I thought that his emotion did him credit. It was quite

possible that he might have supposed Mrs. Pole to be a deeply-injured woman, and that in the course of the services he had rendered her he had grown to be a partisan. The poor thing had no doubt told her story to her own advantage, had exculpated herself, and cast all blame upon her husband. That, of course, was natural, and it was not unnatural that Goldsmith should have believed in her, and have been shocked and grieved at her sudden and early death. He must at least, I thought, have cared vastly more for her than the ordinary solicitor cares for an ordinary client.

He had gathered his belongings together, and stood prepared to go. Pole had risen to his feet, and was walking slowly and thoughtfully up and down the room.

'There's a mere matter of business, Bister Pole,' said Goldsmith haltingly, 'if I might bedtion it at such a tibe. I've sent your cheque for Mrs. Pole's quarterly income to my bankers in the ordinary course. The

poor lady only drew on me for a fortnight, and there'll be something left when everything is paid. I'll send in my account, and a cheque for the balance. I wish you good afternoon, Bister Pole — good afternoon, Bister Denham.'

We both returned his parting salutation, and Pole's voice had a tone of unusual gentleness in it, almost of apology. The little Jew went his way and we were left to ourselves.

For a long time not a word was spoken— I dare say, indeed, that we sat in silence for an hour. Pole had mechanically taken up his book again, and sat staring at the open pages; but he never turned a leaf. When at last he looked up at me his eyes were moist, and there was a softened look in his face.

'Jack,' he said, 'will you come out with me?'

I answering in the affirmative, he promised to join me in five minutes, and I went downstairs to my own rooms, and there made ready for out-of-doors. It was raining in

torrents still when we turned out upon Holborn. Pole hailed a cab, and gave the cabman instructions to drive to the cemetery at Kensal Green. The rain pelted down monotonously, racing in little rivulets down the glass before us, and blotting out the landscape of the streets. We were both unusually subdued, and neither had anything to say to the other. It was too early after the receipt of the news to experience anything of that sense of relief which it was ultimately bound to bring, and for my own part I should have resented any such sensation in myself as an impiety. I thought of the poor creature's threat to Pole, 'I will make your life a burden to you,' and I reflected on its futility, and on the uncertainty of all human promise, whether for good or evil. Her life must needs have been profoundly wretched to have left such an impress on her face as I remembered. The certificate of death gave her age at twenty-eight years. I had supposed her to be much older, for the set scorn and hatred

and hard misery of her face seemed scarcely possible for one so young. Looking back upon the face as I remembered it, it was evident that it had once been superbly handsome. I thought of youth and beauty defaced and ruined by self-will and the one vice to which the unhappy woman had clung, and now that she was gone, and could work no evil any more, I pitied that brief life-tragedy profoundly. I knew—there was no need of words between us—that Pole's thoughts ran in the same channel as my own. Once, his hand falling accidentally upon mine, he clasped it very strongly and firmly; but that was the only sign that was made on either side.

We reached the cemetery, and having made inquiries at the lodge as to the whereabouts of the grave, we walked towards it. The rain-soaked mound of newly-turned earth looked very raw and desolate. There is nothing in the world so desolate to look at as a new-made grave. I have looked on many

since that day, and some of them have covered the remains of those who have been very dear to me, yet I have never felt the sense so clearly.

We turned away in silence and went home. The man at the lodge stood sheltered from the rain in his own doorway, and looked at us, I thought, a little callously. Yet, of course, it was no affair of his, and usage makes the griefs of others of little weight to us.

In my affection for Pole, and in the ardour with which I espoused his cause, I had gone as near to hating that unhappy wife of his as I had ever gone to hating anybody. But now that she could work no more mischief, my thoughts softened towards her. In the course of a day or two Pole began to talk about her in a chastened way, and it became evident that he had once held a very real affection for her. He told me, bit by bit, the whole story of their separation. It is not necessary to repeat it here, and there are too many cases like it in the world to make it

novel enough to be worth the telling. The sordid, miserable history of drink and an ungovernable temper, the sorriest, meanest, ugliest of tragedies, a tale worth no man's relating and no man's hearing. He told it gently and with pity, and when it was once told we closed the page which held the story, and resolved (as we thought) to turn back to it no more.

My friend charged me with the performance of the last dues of respect, and went down to Worborough Court, leaving me alone in London. I followed the instructions he left with me, and in the meantime his letters bore but one allusion to the event of his wife's death. 'Lord Worborough,' he wrote, 'was relieved at the news I had to give him, and I sincerely believe that the mere fact of this grief being lifted from his mind may add a year or two to his life. He has taken an extraordinary liking to me, and I could find it in my heart to wish that we had known each other longer. I shall probably spend

most of my time with him now, for the old boy clings to me, and he is really such a fine and noble old fellow that I am almost as fond of him as he of me. He suffers a great deal, but he is very game about it, and altogether he is the very finest specimen of the fine old English gentleman it has been my luck to encounter anywhere. I hope he'll flourish for many a day to come.'

It is not good to think of the death of any human creature being hailed, no matter with what inward reluctance, as a relief, but Mrs. Pole's departure lifted a dreadful shadow from the hearts of those who had been most concerned with her, and it would have been a sheer hypocrisy to have professed to mourn her. To forgive, and then, as speedily as might be, to forget, was all she could have asked from the world.

Six or seven weeks later, when the skies had cleared, and the long-deferred early summer was upon us, shining with such a

splendour as half obliterated the memory of cold and storm, I paid a second and a final visit to the cemetery at Kensal Green. I had a companion—a companion too light and young for a visit to that home of mournful memories. But Clara and I had spoken so often of Pole's freedom, and in the mind of each there was so evident a result to spring from it, that she had grown as interested as I myself was; and when I made that final, necessary visit to the place to see that Pole's injunctions had been properly fulfilled, she needed little persuasion to accompany me.

When I had last seen the place it had seemed the very home of desolation; but now, with the bright May sunshine and the bright May flowers, and the chirping of innumerable birds, it had another aspect, and seemed to speak with a voice of tender reconciliation to the inevitable doom. God's Acre!

The grave was neatly railed. The new-laid turf was bright and green, and flowers

shone above it and diffused their gentle odours. The stone bore a simple inscription—'In Memory of Adelaide Pole'—then the date of death and the age, and below the three words, 'Here is Rest!' Rest was possible for the living as well as for the dead, and I suppose that Pole had chosen that brief inscription with some eye to its double meaning.

As we had walked together I had related to Clara, as far as I could do without shocking her, the story Pole had told me. She had been very strongly prejudiced against him, and had been more inclined to champion the wife's cause than the husband's. I had ventured to hint shyly of my certainty of Pole's affections for Miss Delamere, and I went so far as to indicate my belief that the affection was returned. We were both saddened and solemnised by our visit to the place, and yet there was a sense of our own affection in our minds. My wife has told me, long ago, that she was certain even before

that day of my love for her, and I remember well a sort of trembling certainty of hers. We walked about the place of graves in the sunshine with our own hearts beating to that eternal, beautiful tune to whose music the whole world marches. It was more solemn than it often sounds, and gentler, but it sounded all the same.

I pleaded Pole's cause with her. It was unlikely that he would speak for a long time to come, but I begged her not to use any influence she might have with Miss Delamere against him.

'If she cares for him,' I urged, 'you can only grieve her, but can never change her mind.' And, standing before the tombstone, I appealed to her. 'There is rest here,' I said. 'Let the living have rest as well.'

She answered in a subdued voice,

'I believe that Mary cared for him before she knew of this unhappy marriage. I believe that she will never care for anybody else.

I am quite sure that nothing any one could say could alter her, for she is not a girl to be moved by anybody's words.'

'Then, at least,' I answered, 'you will say nothing that could give her pain. There is no higher-minded, nobler-hearted man in the world than Pole.'

'Why should I say a word to hurt her?' she asked me. 'She is the dearest friend I have in the world.'

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